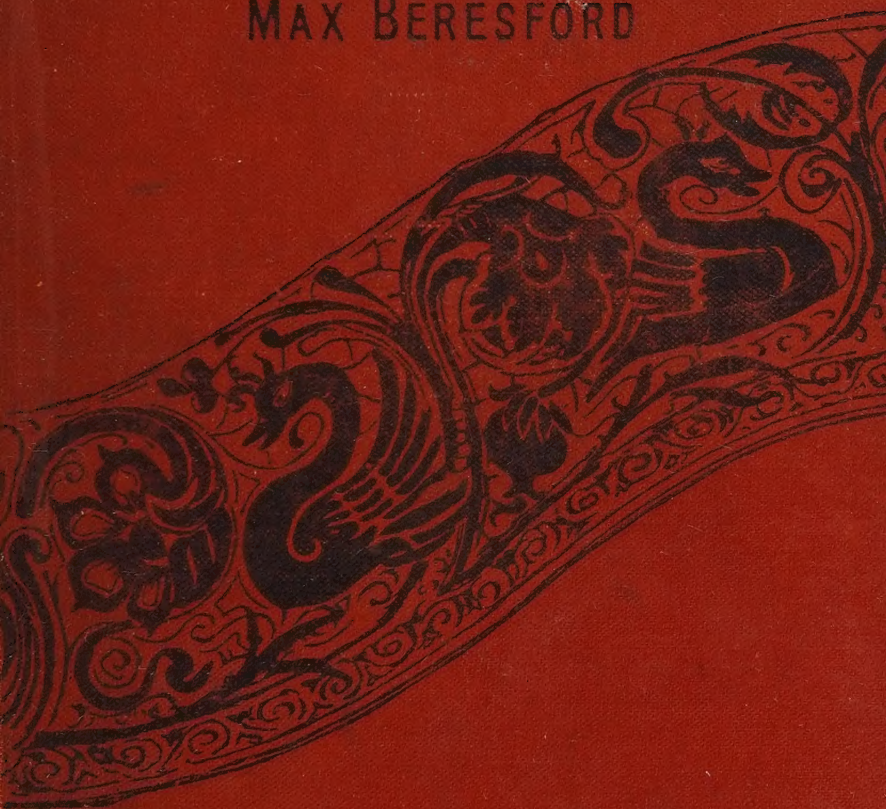


BELHAVEN

MAX BERESFORD



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VOL. II.

BELHAVEN

BY

MAX BERESFORD

AUTHOR OF 'BONNIE DUNDEE.'

'This curse will come on us,
To see our idols perish.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BELHAVEN.

CHAPTER I.

SACRIFICE.

‘ Or art thou sure thou shalt have time for death ?’

ONE evening, when the Haldanes were dining at the Towers, Gordon suddenly lost colour and fell back in his chair. Sybil was at his side in an instant, and Mrs. Haldane, after a sharp glance at Bessie, whose face was as white as Gordon’s, crossed also to his chair, prompt in suggestion. Bessie only stayed for a look

at her host ; then she fled from the room, summoned Elspeth, and despatched a man for Dr. Rutherford.

Elspeth was immediately on the scene, her stern old face puckered and tremulous. She had heard the death-bell in her ears all day, and was prepared to find Gordon a corpse. But before the doctor arrived he had regained consciousness, and was lying on the sofa laughing at the white faces round him, and declaring there was nothing the matter—a crumb of bread must have gone the wrong way, that was all.

Sybil, however, had never forgotten Rutherford's words in Miller's cottage. She knew there was some secret malady to be dreaded, and she was tortured by anxiety. If it had not been for Mrs. Haldane she must have given way to her

fears; but that lady, who seemed to consider an invalid always her peculiar monopoly, had obliged her to assert her claim to being with her father, and the small dispute diverted her fears.

Bessie had quite recovered from her first alarm, and was running about making suggestions, joking with Gordon, and generally confounding the inferences her mother had drawn from her sudden paleness. She was laughingly upbraiding Gordon for the fright he had given them when Dr. Rutherford came in.

‘H’m, you are a very good specimen of a dead man!’ he said, shaking hands with his patient. ‘I met Sandy just now in tears because he had lost his last chance of warning you. Miss Haldane, was it you who sent to tell me Mr. Gordon was dead? Ah, the English are too impulsive.

A little Scotch caution might be useful, eh? Well, now, you are all just haver-ing. It is Miss Gordon who needs my advice—not her father. I must banish that white face into another room, and ask Mrs. Haldane to administer a glass of wine while I see what is wrong here.'

Rutherford's breezy cheerfulness refreshed them all. Sybil took his hint and went off with Bessie to the drawing-room while Mrs. Haldane lingered. She was hesitating between her interest in a medical diagnosis and the rule of conventions; but finally, yielding to the more arbitrary force, she followed the girls and left Gordon to the doctor and Elspeth.

'You have not been taking care of yourself,' Rutherford said, brusquely. 'I warned you months ago;—you must really be more careful. Heart going like

a steam-pump, can't bear any overstrain. Ever had a similar attack ?'

'Not that I can remember——' Gordon began.

'Na, na, he doesna ken what he is sayin',' Elspeth interrupted, shrilly. 'He had juist such anither turn i' the fa' o' the year. It was ane stormy nicht—I min' o't weel, for Sandy had gotten a fright, thinkin' it was the ghaist. We fand him oot by i' the gairden scrattin' at the windy-brods to let himsel' intil the wainscot room. Sandy an' me brocht him in, an' he was fine an' ill-like a' the nicht. I couldna mak oot what ailed him, an' I bade Miss Sybil win hame to him.'

'You false woman! So it was you that brought the lassie back? Had I but kenned it!' Gordon exclaimed, shaking his fist at her.

‘Well now, what brought on that attack? Had you had any excitement that would account for it?’

‘I—think not,’ Gordon hesitated over his answer, and the doctor turned enquiringly to Elspeth.

‘Ou ay ; the laddie Macdonal’ had been to his dinner that nicht. An’ Sandy brocht ward that the ghaist,—or mebbe Robert Gordon’s wife, I’m no’ sayin’, for I saw a white wumman mysel’—had walked i’ the gairden that nicht.’

A quick change passed across Gordon’s face. For an instant his eyes were dark, then he looked up with a smile.

‘Elspeth, you’re nothing but an auld wife with your ghosts!’ Then he glanced frankly at the doctor. ‘I fancy I had had some bother that night,—business

worry probably since Macdonald was here, —but Elspeth is taking you in with a cock-and-bull story. I can't recollect any attack.'

'You dinna ken what you're sayin', Robert Gordon! A cock-and-bull story likely!' Elspeth interrupted, indignantly.

At this moment the door opened and Sandy's little bright eyes intruded.

'Come in by, Sandy!' she cried. 'Come in an' tell Robert Gordon——'

'I'll no' tell him but the ane thing,' said Sandy, coming forward, and shuffling to the sofa. 'Mon! you hae the time to repent; —the A'michty has no cutten you aff i' your sin. Think you o' them that's taen sudden and——'

'Look here, Rutherford, turn the old fellow out,' said Gordon, with a languid

good-humour. ‘He’ll preach me into my grave—I hear nothing but warnings from him morning, noon, and night.’

‘It’s for the sake of my little lass,’ Sandy began; but Gordon moved from the sofa with the most winning smile imaginable, and laying his hand over the old man’s mouth forced him gently from the room.

Then he came back, threw himself down again, and looked up gasping.

‘Yes,’ Rutherford said, severely. ‘You see you can’t play any tricks with yourself. Even that slight exertion might have been fatal. You must be perfectly quiet, no business, or worry, or anything. You are in a most critical condition. Any moment——’

‘I understand,’ Gordon interrupted, signing to the doctor to be silent.

‘I’ll send you some digitalis to relieve the palpitation, but the great thing is quiet;—do you understand? Well, good day. I’ll just have a word with Miss Gordon before I go.’

He went out of the room, and Gordon turned to Elspeth, who was standing grim and indignant behind the sofa.

‘You’ll just have to make me a bairn again,’ he said, pleasantly. ‘I don’t take much notice of what Rutherford says,—a young doctor exaggerates danger to add to his own importance. And if it were not for Sybil I shouldn’t much care if he was right. What do you think, Elspeth? do I look like a dying man?’

He lifted his handsome face from the cushion and laughed; but Elspeth threw her apron over her head and sobbed aloud.

‘Eh, laddie! laddie, I doot it’s true. I

doot you winna be lang on this earth. The death-bell's been i' my ears a' nicht, an' I heard the bairn wailin' in the wainscot room——'

'Toots, woman! Cease your cauld kail comfort wi' your bells and your bairns, and dinna greet for a man till you see the sods well on him. Go and tell the lassie I want her, and don't let her see you greeting!'

Sybil came at once, and sat down on a footstool that he might not see her moved face. She had just heard from the doctor that the attack pointed to some vital weakness, and she was full of anxiety.

'Has Rutherford told you?' Gordon asked, laying his hand on her head.

'Yes,' she said, simply.

He stroked her hair in silence for some minutes.

‘It’s all fudge, you know, Sybil. Those young men like to magnify themselves at the cost of their patients. What did Tennyson say?’

“Those doctors rise on stepping stones
Of our dead selves to higher things.”

—eh?’

Sybil could not join in his laugh.

‘Oh, daddy!’ she cried, ‘suppose he is right!’

‘Ay, suppose he is right! Do you know, I shouldn’t mind so much if I saw you happily settled? Come now, let us make a bargain.—You know Rutherford says I shall be all right if I have nothing to worry me;—in fact, I’d have every prospect of living to a green old age. Well, you are my greatest worry, so put an end to my anxieties, and tell me you will marry Rutherford very soon.’

Sybil started, and all the blood left her cheek.

‘Oh, no—I can’t! You mustn’t ask!’

‘And why not, pray?’

‘He—he hasn’t asked me,’ she stammered.

‘Oh, that’s all right, he spoke to me. I know he wants you, and it would be an immense relief to me to see you settled. I would give up the bank then, and—and travel, take life easily. That’s the only chance left me, Rutherford says. Come, do you agree? Will you help your old daddy to live?’

He pinched her ear as he used to do, but Sybil was silent. Her brain was on fire. Ought she to be asked to do this? Ought she to sacrifice her love, her happiness, herself, that Gordon might ‘take life easily’? Was it necessary to spoil her

own life that his might be prolonged?

She raised her head and looked at her father. There was nothing in his appearance to show that his life hung on a balance: except that he was lying down, there was no trace remaining of the attack that had alarmed her. He was gay and smiling as usual, and her heart rose up in bitter protest against the necessity of self-sacrifice. He had, by his own words, barred her way to happiness with Alec. Was he now to force her into living misery with a man she did not love?

Her eyes grew hard and rebellious, but meeting a wistful entreaty in his, her mood melted, and the old love came rushing back in overwhelming force.

A year ago how easy it would have been to die for him—and now she hesitated at

a smaller sacrifice that would prolong his life it might be for many days !

In bitter self-upbraidal she flung her arms round him and clung to him sobbing.

His heart was beating furiously, with scarcely an interval between the pulsations, and she lifted her head from his breast, shocked and agonised.

It was true then ! His life hung on those swift disordered pulses ; any excitement, any anxiety might shock them into eternal quiet.

A pang of keen reproach shot through her, and she gazed at him with a world of anguish in her eyes.

He was her father, the adoration of her childhood, the hero of her later years ; and though her idol had fallen, he was still

the tender, indulgent father, thinking in this moment of alarm less of himself than of her; while she—! Her face was crimson with shame as she saw how she had placed her own happiness first, making it more important, even, than his life.

Her lips became white, and the colour slowly faded from her cheeks.

‘I can’t decide—to-night. You must give me time,’ she said, her voice trembling in spite of her effort to control it.

Gordon drew her close to him, and looked laughingly into her eyes.

‘One would think,’ he said, with a radiant smile, ‘that you were going to marry that handsome doctor merely to please your old dad!’

And so we lay our naked, shivering souls on the sacrificial marble, and while

the knife flashes we know we die needlessly.

Sybil went from the room with pale face and tightly clenched fingers, while Gordon closed his eyes and meditated on his motives for the request he had just made.

He flattered himself that his attitude towards Sybil had been all that could be desired, and he laughed to himself as he thought how easy it was to dupe her.

His *rôle* of the unselfish parent had been favourable for the exercise of his histrionic talents, and his assumption of it had taken in the girl.

Her blindness was actually criminal. Could she not see that he wanted her out of his way? She was an obstacle in his path, a daily reminder of his past, with

that fatal resemblance to her mother; a deterrent to his intentions with regard to Bessie Haldane; and she must be removed.

If she were married and no longer mistress of the Towers, he was assured that Bessie would not prove unyielding; and he had seized this moment of anxiety and solicitude to work on Sybil's feelings, and so hasten the consummation of his wishes.

His villainy was almost incredible. A few hours before he had been in the very jaws of death, yet the moment of his escape saw him plotting new wrong.

Yet finally he turned away from himself with loathing of the meditated evil, and his brow grew black with remorse.

The inood was evanescent; but for the

moment his better self struggled against the evil that for eighteen years had encrusted his nature and now held him in an iron bondage.

CHAPTER II.

ON BUSINESS.

‘A friend’s a part well-prized by all.’

‘HEAVENS, man! what’s to do with you that you carry that dour face?’ Dr. Rutherford asked, stopping Macdonald in the High Street half-an-hour after leaving the Towers.

Alec looked worried and anxious, and was disinclined to meet Rutherford, whose professional cares sat lightly on his shoulders. He had just left a patient face to face with death, and the echoes of Sybil’s de-

spairing grief still rung in his ears, yet his careless gaiety was in no way affected.

In presence of sin or sorrow he could be stirred to indignation or sympathy ; but he was only moved on the surface of his nature and easily recovered the momentarily disturbed calm.

The man who is all things to all men is not unfrequently nothing to himself ; and the airy good-nature that made Rutherford popular unfitted him for self-direction. But what would you have ? Society's pets are not the dark-browed travailing in pain that better things may be born, but the sunny-faced unconscious of the great throes of a struggling humanity.

We canonise our martyrs, but idolise the successful ; and to the living, worship is preferable than the remote possibilities of the calendar.

No doubt in time Rutherford would justify public confidence in him as fortune's favourite; for success multiplies itself almost as certainly as does the race. The difference between himself and Alec Macdonald was an epigram.

'Ah,' said Alec, brusquely, 'I am likely to have a dour face with business worry, but that's no reason why I should parade it. I am just off to the Towers to consult Mr. Gordon.'

'If you are going to transfer your bother to him, I must forbid your going. I have just come back from Belhaven;—Gordon's in a most critical state. The least excitement may be fatal;—he has had a very serious attack to-night.'

'Has he?—I wish I had known; I might have been of some help. Very serious, did you say? Poor child!

does she know?—Miss Gordon, I mean.’

Rutherford looked curiously at Alec’s agitated face before he replied.

‘Yes; I told her—Mrs. Haldane is there. You are not going?’

‘Unfortunately I must. This affair can’t wait. I will only ask a few questions, that won’t excite Mr. Gordon. I will not run any risk.’

‘You will have to be most careful. However, I have warned you.—The smallest excitement may kill him, so you know the risk you must avoid.’

‘I know,’ Alec replied, gravely; and he walked on full of concern for Sybil. And beneath his anxiety was a strong and unsubdued yearning,—the desire to shield her from the menacing sorrow, to snatch her from Rutherford, from everyone, to the safe shelter of his love for ever.

He loved her with all the strength and devotion of a strenuous manhood. The marks of storm and stress on her face which had repelled the doctor had only attracted him the more ; and the pale, worn Sybil appealed to his heart more than the radiant Sybil in her flashing beauty had done. He had been lured by her beauty into a hunger for possession. Her sorrow roused in him the nobler purpose of service.

He walked along the road in the gathering twilight, seeing no stars of promise in the lonely skies. The mists lay low on land and sea, and the waves moaned their augury at his feet, while in the distance it faded in the dim perspective of sound. And yet in his bearing there was a certain exaltation penetrating his humility ; for though the temptation of a week ago had

humiliated him, he had the bracing consciousness of triumph.

He walked on briskly, the sharp beat of his footsteps falling with noisy iteration on the deserted road.

Sybil was with her father when Alec was shown into the room, and his quick glance told him that this new trouble had fallen heavily on her. He knew how she loved Gordon ; but he was scarcely prepared for the havoc wrought in her by the few hours' anxiety. She seemed to have passed through some terrible crisis, and her white face and despairing eyes moved him strongly. He would have given anything he possessed to have comforted her ; and he could do nothing.

Yet when he took her cold hand in his a passion of renunciation mastered him, and he longed for the power to take

Gordon's place, to lie down and die in his stead that his loss might be averted.

‘How good of you to come!’ she cried, impulsively, letting her hand remain in his clasp. ‘How did you know?’

‘I met Dr. Rutherford; he told me.’

At the name a scared look passed over her face, and she hurriedly withdrew her hand. Alec saw that he had reminded her of the barrier between them, and he sternly incased himself in the reserve his sympathy had broken through.

‘I was coming out in any case,’ he said, coldly. ‘I wanted to see you on business.’

He turned to Gordon as if concluding the interview with Sybil, but she interposed.

‘Oh, there must be no business to-night! The doctor said he was to have perfect rest.’

‘Be quiet, Sybil!’ Gordon checked her excitement.

‘I am sorry to have to trouble you just now,’ Alec said, ‘but it is really necessary. However, I’ll not keep you a minute. Johnson is coming down to-morrow, and those bonds of Miss Dixon——’

‘What?’ Gordon interrupted, while the perspiration broke out on his forehead.

‘Daddy dear! you are getting excited, you will hurt yourself. Oh, Mr. Macdonald! don’t you see how grey his face is? Please go away—please do! You will kill him.’

She looked beseechingly at Alec, but before he could answer Gordon interposed.

‘Sybil, there’s no need to go on like that; I can take care of myself—I must see Macdonald for a moment. Go now; I will send for you soon.’

There was something in his face which silenced her protestations. Giving a reproachful glance at Alec, she turned and left the room in a stately fashion that lost some of its impressiveness, it was so dominated by anxiety.

As soon as Alec had closed the door, Gordon drew a phial from his pocket and measured a few drops into a glass.

'Ruthertford said he would send some digitalis,' he said, 'but this curari is worth more than all his nostrums. Now about those bonds.'

He had taken his dose and glanced carelessly at Alec.

'They are not in the safe, you say; and Johnson is coming to-morrow.'

Alec stared at his chief. How did he know the bonds were missing? Then a sudden suspicion reddened his cheek, and

he was unable to gaze at the man before him.

Gordon laughed lightly.

‘Anyone seeing you now would say that you had stolen them yourself! After all, the thief must be one of us two, since no one else can get to that safe. And to-morrow Johnson will discover the theft. Well now, which of the two of us can bear prison life?’

Alec raised his eyes and looked directly at Gordon. There was no doubt now in his mind. He had wished to die in this man’s place, and a harder task had been set him!

His hesitation was momentary.

‘You are above suspicion,’ he said, hoarsely. ‘You have no motive for such a crime—it is easy for me to escape—I can get away to France——’

He stopped. Gordon had clutched at his hand, and fallen back cold and pallid.

Alec felt his pulseless wrist with a wild sense of relief. The man was dead! His own sacrifice was unnecessary. The shame of detection would have no power over the dead.

But there was Sybil! Could he leave her to bear the thrice bitter anguish of reproach and guilt? How it would crush her, already tortured by bereavement.

Five minutes after, Sybil, anxiously pacing up and down the passage, heard the library door close. She turned full of protest to face Alec, but the words died on her lips at sight of his eyes.

‘What is it? What is it?’

She gripped his hand as though she

would force the truth from his white lips and maddened eyes.

He looked at her and tried to speak but no words would come.

‘You have killed him,’ Sybil said, slowly, while her eyes swooned with horror.

Alec was silent. Then he laid a rough hand on her shoulder and gazed blankly at her.

‘I am going—for ever,’ he said, hoarsely. ‘Forgive me.’

She stared uncomprehendingly at him, and then the life faded from her face and left it blue and cold.

‘Forgive?’ she said, slowly. ‘Then you *have* killed him? You, of all men,—*you* have killed him.’

There was an awful stillness in her voice, and as she stood there quieted to

death, he knew how he loved her, and what awaited him in losing her.

‘Say you forgive me,’ he pleaded, passionately.

‘Forgive you? Never! never! I could almost hate you!’

Her voice broke in a sob; she drew herself from the hand that would have detained her, and moved with white set face towards what awaited her behind that closed door.

Alec gazed after her a moment, and made a step forward as though to draw her back. But he checked the impulse in time, and with a heavy sigh, like one in a dream, he passed from the lighted hall into the outside darkness. And the night express bore him muffled and scarcely recognisable away from Dunbar and from the dogging steps of the law.

In the little country manse his mother stirred in her sleep, and called his name. Was she dreaming that her laddie was rushing through the night, flying from the hands of love—and of justice?

CHAPTER III.

A CRISIS.

‘ Here am I the scoffer, who have proved
Life’s vanity, won by a word again
Into my own life.’

At the Towers Gordon was lying in his room closely guarded by Sybil, who would admit no one but Elspeth, in spite of Mrs. Haldane’s offers of help in nursing. She had been with her father all day, and consequently was in ignorance of the event of the morning—the scandal at the bank.

The town had been in a ferment since

the arrival of the inspector and the discovery that while the manager was lying at the point of death his assistant had decamped. Alec had been recognised at the station the previous night, and the reason of his flight was not far to seek. The matter was being hushed up, and vainly conjectured under breath, yet in spite of Johnson's precautions all Dunbar knew that Alec was under suspicion of robbing the bank.

Some of his friends hinted that he had absconded with half the capital. Others, more intimate and therefore less scrupulous, said that he had made a clean sweep of the place.

The nucleus of the spreading rumour was in the fact that certain bonds were missing from the safe. This, taken in connection with Alec's unexplained absence, pointed to

prearranged fraud. But the whole affair was shrouded in an irritating mystery, and Gordon lying unconscious could do nothing towards its solution.

Fleming Johnson had gone at once to the Towers, but fortunately had been met by Dr. Rutherford who forbade any attempt to see Gordon. Indeed, Johnson would have accomplished nothing by insisting on an interview, for Gordon was still in the state of death-like coma into which Alec's visit had thrown him.

Sybil watched beside him, and Rutherford was careful to keep from her ears the agitating gossip concerning Alec.

Meanwhile, the news was hurrying towards her as fast as Mrs. Haldane and Bessie could bring it.

At the post-office they had encountered Mr. Ladislav, snuff-box in hand ; his face

more than ever like a walnut. His wrinkles twisted into curious knots as he encountered the ladies. Bessie smiled responsively.

‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘Dunbar has got something to talk about at last, and it’s lost its head in consequence. I’ll tell you a good story, Miss Bessie. I met Peter just now—one of the fishers, down at the shore, you know. Nature gave him such a big heart she had to economise when it came to the brains. Well, Peter was to buy a pair of boots for himself, so he got a stick and measured the size before he set out to get them. When he came to the shop he’d forgotten the bit stickie, so off he goes away home for it. When I met him, he was winning back to Mackay’s with it. “Man,” said I, “how is’t you didna mind you had gotten your foot by you a’

the time?" He couldn't see it, and I left him at the shop scratching his head. He'd been talking about this freak of Macdonald's till he had wit for nought else.'

'What freak of Macdonald's?' Mrs. Haldane asked, stiffly.

The minister's 'good stories' never interested her.

Mr. Ladislaw pursed up his mouth, and took a pinch of snuff.

'Oh, just his freak,' he answered, cautiously.

'Has he been saving more drowned men?' Bessie asked, carelessly.

'No, no, poor laddie! And you haven't heard? Well, well. Go to Miss Dixon, she'll tell you. It will be grand for her to tell somebody that doesn't know the whole matter better than she does herself.'

‘Mr. Ladislaw, do tell me what it is,’
Bessie coaxed.

‘It’s not so much after all, Miss Bessie.
He’s just away with all the siller in the
bank!’

The minister’s eyes had disappeared behind a dry twinkle.

‘Is that what you call Scotch humour?’
Bessie’s tone was severe.

‘No, no, missie, it’s English honesty.
But that’s what they say he has done,—
robbed the bank and gone south.’

‘Robbed the bank?—how absurd!
You can’t really mean that? Mr. Mac-
donald! Why, he was ever such a splendid
fellow!’

‘Ou, ay, a nice-like lad.’

The minister’s caution lashed Bessie’s
surprise into indignation.

‘A nice-like lad?—he was a hero!’

How could he be a thief? It's impossible!

'In my experience of human nature,' said Mrs. Haldane, 'it is the impossible that is done.'

'Ou, ay, ou ay,' Mr. Ladislaw agreed. 'And there's a deal of human nature in a man when he is tempted. But he wasn't the lad to play with other people's money. I wouldn't say he had anything to do with it, only he left a note asking Johnson to keep things quiet for his father's sake. The old man is a minister out by Auchinblae;—I know a good story about him——'

'For all that he is not guilty,' Bessie interposed. 'He had no need of money, and he wouldn't have robbed the bank the day before the inspector came down.'

'Well, well,' the minister sighed, 'it

must be one of the two men at the bank. If it's not Macdonald, it's Gordon.'

'How dare you?' Bessie began furiously. Then she recollected, paused, crimsoned, and added, with affected cynicism, 'In his case there's no human nature to account for the deed. He is outside the motives that make men criminals. It is poverty and want that drive men to crime.'

'To be human is to be criminal,' said Mrs. Haldane, with cheerful brevity.

'How does Sybil take it, I wonder?' said Bessie, faltering under her mother's keen glance.

Her exclamation had betrayed more than she had intended, and her tone was propitiatory.

'I've just heard from the doctor that she kens nothing about it, poor lassie,'

said Mr. Ladislaw ; and Mrs. Haldane, seeing before her the delicate task of human vivisection, went away to probe Sybil's heart. For she meant to use her information as a surgeon uses an instrument for the discovery of matter.

When they reached the Belhaven Road, and saw the long stretch of dusty loneliness before them, Mrs. Haldane recognised opportunity, and seized it. Within four walls, fenced and bounded by domestic life, it was difficult for her to approach Bessie. But out here in the liberty of the ample sunshine, freed from social restraint, and at one with nature,—represented to-day by dust and an odour of decaying fish,—it would be possible to speak to the girl with the authority of her relationship.

Bessie was, as it happened, in precisely

the mood for confidence. Gordon's seizure had filled her with cruel anxiety, under which her strength and secrecy were fast giving way. The impulse still to conceal her real feeling for him was powerful; but a night spent in passionate weeping had undermined her strength and left her physically weak.

‘Everything teaches us that confidence in man is misplaced,’ said Mrs Haldane, by way of introduction to her subject. ‘If we refuse to learn the lesson from his moral corruption, we cannot be deaf to the voice of physical corruption.’

She sniffed the eloquent air as she spoke, and, Bessie maintaining a set quiet, continued:

‘That unfortunate young man is an example of the one corruption, and Robert

Gordon on the verge of the tomb will soon be——’

Bessie’s laugh jarred through the sentence, and silenced it.

‘Oh, mother! have you no heart that you can think of him and—and *death* together?’

In spite of her laugh, the words swooned with feeling, and Mrs. Haldane drew up in her swinging masculine walk and suddenly faced the girl.

At the sight of Bessie’s heavy eyes and colourless lips a quiver passed over her hard face, and the grim mouth softened.

‘Child, do you love him?’ she asked, sharply.

‘Yes,’ said Bessie.

‘Then God help you!’ That was all. The colloquy might have hardened the

.

girl against her mother, but that, looking up when the silence could no longer be borne, she saw the stern eyes dim with tears. Yet Mrs. Haldane's voice was rough when she spoke. 'For a woman, love and pain mean the same thing. I would have saved you from both if I could. Child, don't break your heart—it is like every other woman's, made to hold a dead love. The only living love is the dead love.'

When they reached the Towers, they found Sybil in the garden, her face giving evidence of all that she had passed through.

The shadowy garden with its cool trees and fragrant flower-masses, its perfumed silence and rainbowed lawn, coming after the dusty road, was like the restful understanding which after a lifetime of arid

antagonism Bessie and her mother had reached at length.

Sybil turned to the two with a pale smile.

‘Daddy has spoken to me! He is conscious. He will live.’

‘I am glad to hear it,’ said Mrs. Haldane, briskly.

The colour rushed to Bessie’s face at the words, and she gave a half-sob, then kissed Sybil impulsively. The moment that followed might have been embarrassing, but with a spontaneous desire to divest it of significance, mother and daughter began to speak, and for a moment or two carried on the following duet, Bessie taking the treble, Mrs. Haldane the bass.

‘You are not to believe a word of this story about Robin Adair.’—‘My dear child, I am sorry to bring you bad news.’

‘It is quite certain he is innocent.’—
‘That young Macdonald is a great scoundrel.’

‘Don’t believe anything they tell you, Sybil.’—‘Maintain an impartial attitude, dear. Human nature is unreliable.’

‘A brave fellow like that couldn’t be a common thief.’—‘However fine the character, it is always tainted.’

By this time Sybil had begun to see some meaning in the mixed phrases. Something was the matter with Alec;—and she had blamed him needlessly and had parted from him in anger the previous night!

‘What is it?’ she asked, entreatingly.
‘What are you saying about Alec? What has he done?’

‘Gone away suddenly on business,’
Bessie answered.

‘Decamped with all the money in the bank,’ said Mrs. Haldane.

All at once Mrs. Haldane’s hands were caught in a hard grip, and Sybil’s voice, resolute and angry, commanded,

‘I insist on your telling me plainly at once!’

‘Hoity toity!’ said that lady, much affronted, ‘let go my hands, Sybil Gordon. In my day we had a little respect for our elders.’

‘And none for the commandments!’ put in Bessie, whose gaiety and daring had recovered themselves in the last few minutes. ‘Now, mother, go away and leave Sybil to me. I will tell her everything.’

Mrs. Haldane had no faith in anæsthetics medical or moral; like George Eliot, her ideal of endurance was [the capacity to do without opium. She had trained Bessie

in that belief, but found the faith more satisfactory in theory than in practice; for Bessie brought it to bear unexpectedly on all phases of duty, dubbing social and filial amenities anæsthetics. Life as presented to Mrs. Haldane through her child was the keen and naked edge of an unadorned realism. ‘This comes of emancipation,—serve her right!’ said the vindictive. And, seeing her olden beliefs come home, like curses, to roost, Mrs. Haldane began to have a healthy respect for the doctrine of natural sequence.

When Bessie took Sybil thus summarily out of her hands, she felt that she had been defrauded of an opportunity for surgical investigation, but she could not resist Bessie after what had passed between them on the road, and she was forced to retire.

The good news of Gordon's recovery made her anxious for her child's future. An interview with him might reassure her as to his affection for Bessie; and, Sybil absent, it would be as well to see him at once.

She bent her steps to the house, and went to his room; but her tap brought Elspeth to the door, all bristles, like a porcupine.

'How is your master?' Mrs. Haldane demanded, in a strident yet confidential whisper.

'He's some better,' said Elspeth, with scant courtesy; 'an' I'll be obleeged tae you, if you'll gae awa mair douce-like than you hae cam.'

'I am going in to see him,' said Mrs. Haldane, wedding confidence with command.

‘I’se warrant you’re no’!’ said Elspeth.
‘It taks twa birds to mak ane egg!’

‘You forget your position,’ said Mrs. Haldane, with dignity; ‘allow me to pass, if you please.’

During this time, Elspeth had held the door against the enemy, but seeing on Mrs. Haldane’s face a determination to enter, by force if necessary, she turned her head and called softly,

‘Don, come away, Don.’

The great brute rose from his place beside Gordon’s bed, and came to the door showing his teeth and snarling at Mrs. Haldane, between whom and himself existed an open enmity.

‘Lie you doon an’ bite her gin she tries in, Don,’ said Elspeth, with a grim delight in routing the foe.

Mrs. Haldane was not to be easily van-

quished. She made a step forward, to the music of a subdued growl.

‘At her, Don, guid doggie,’ said Elspeth.

Mrs. Haldane started back with a little scream.

‘Oh, the monster! Oh, you wicked, ill-bred old woman!’

She was left addressing the panels of the door. Elspeth had locked it in her face.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

‘ In this new shade of Death, the show
Passes me still of form and face.’

SYBIL stood stunned and stupefied in the garden where Bessie had left her. A year ago her trust in human nature would have triumphantly carried her through an experience like this ; but her faith had once been destroyed, and now it was again rudely assailed.

She had heard the story and proudly declared her belief in Alec’s innocence till

a sudden memory of his shamed face and his plea for forgiveness had made her dumb. His behaviour the preceding day had been tantamount to a confession of guilt, and it silenced her proud avowal of his innocence.

‘Leave me alone,’ she said to Bessie, and the girl had left her.

Bessie watched her from the drawing-room pacing the garden with a look of desperate misery on her young face, and her heart ached for her all the more because she could give her no help.

In deepest misery, as in joy, we stand alone; and that pathetic isolation is the secret at once of the soul’s weakness and its strength.

It was Sybil whom this blow must strike, if not through Alec then through Gordon. They alone had access to the room in which

the bonds were kept, and were the only two entrusted with the key-word that would open the great iron safe. One of the two managers must be the guilty man.

Sybil faced her agony without yielding to tears. Her intuition told her Alec was innocent; and yet he had tacitly confessed his guilt by flight, by the note he had left, by his cry for pardon. What was she to think?

‘If I had not been deceived before, I could not believe it,’ she said to herself. ‘And even now I know he is innocent. Who can prove that Johnson is not the thief? It is impossible for Alec to have committed a theft;—he is too noble even to have been tempted.’

After all, it was a pity that there was no one to silence this beautiful confidence in human nature with Mrs. Haldane’s

croak—‘the noblest man has a weakness somewhere.’

How many women have ventured their happiness in confidence like Sybil’s to find it a leaky craft that founders in the first storm ! But there was no one to warn her ; and while she hugged her conviction of Alec’s innocence Dr. Rutherford came down the drive and crossed the lawn to meet her.

Then for the first time she remembered the half promise made to her father the night before. It was possible the doctor had come to put his question to her ; and she, what answer could she give him ?

To promise to marry him would be to seal her own misery ; to refuse might be to sign her father’s death-warrant. Like a startled creature she looked here and there for some way of escape. None offered, and

with white face and beating heart she stood still and waited for him.

A swift glance at his face told her she was not mistaken. His eyes were bright and eager, his air that of a man who is certain of his position.

‘I find my patient unexpectedly better,’ he said, by way of greeting. ‘I could not have hoped for such rapid improvement in his condition. If he had been in the habit of taking drugs, I should have said his attack yesterday was due to something of the sort. Has he ever taken opium, do you know?’

‘I know he has not; for when we were at Auchinblae he refused to take it though the doctor prescribed it. He has no faith in medicine.’

‘No? Well, of course the excitement of Macdonald’s visit, following so close

upon his seizure, sufficiently accounts for the affair. In a day or two he will be quite himself. In the meanwhile, all this bank excitement must be kept from him. Have you heard about it?’

‘Yes, but—but I don’t believe it. He—Mr. Macdonald—is incapable of such a thing.’

Rutherford shrugged his shoulders.

‘I haven’t the word incapable in my vocabulary. Man was made to run the gamut of action from base to noble.’

‘Yet he saved your life!’ Sybil cried, indignantly.

‘Miss Gordon,’ Rutherford said, with a suave smile. ‘Have you not yet learned to distinguish between physical and moral bravery?’

‘I know that a man who risked his life last week would not risk his honour this

week for a paltry sum that anyone would have lent him—daddy, or you, or—anybody.’

‘One can never be quite certain of one’s premise, with human nature in the category,’ said Rutherford. ‘I suppose you know that the stolen bonds belonged to Miss Dixon?’

‘To Miss Prissie? No, I had not heard. Oh, I am very grieved. But that is a point in his favour,’ she added, eagerly. ‘He was very fond of Miss Prissie;—he would never have touched her money.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Rutherford, ‘of course I am grateful to Macdonald, and I don’t want to condemn him, but things point so directly at him that there’s scarcely room for doubt. I had a talk with the inspector this morning,—I thought I might save his coming to bother you;’ he looked

tenderly at Sybil. ‘He told me that yesterday Miss Dixon wrote to the bank directing that certain bonds should be sold, and the money placed to her account. He found the note but the bonds are not forthcoming, and no money has been credited to her. He saw those very bonds the last time he was in Dunbar, so they must have disappeared since Macdonald has been here. This alone wouldn’t prove him guilty, but he left the town in disguise, and the only thing that explains his absence is practically an admission of guilt. He left a note asking them to hush up the affair, for his father’s sake.’

‘Oh, I *hope* they will,’ Sybil cried, with a half-sob, ‘it will kill the poor old man if he hears of it;’ and as she thought of the mother’s pride in her one laddie the tears poured down her face.

She wiped them away immediately, and controlled her voice to ask :

‘ What will the bank do now ? ’

‘ They have issued a warrant for his arrest. Johnson is to act till your father can take command. ’

Sybil was silent, and the doctor’s business-like tone dropped.

‘ But I didn’t come to talk about this wretched affair. There is something else I have to say to you. Your father told me just now . . . Sybil ’

Sybil looked up, and her wild gaze startled him.

‘ Yes, I know . . . but . . . please don’t . . . not yet . . . you must give me time to think ’

She turned her quivering face away from his disappointed eyes. But her evident sorrow touched him, and he

responded with delicate tact to her appeal.

‘It shall be as you like now. I will come for my answer next week.’

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, and left her without another word.

As he walked down the road he did not look like a man overwhelmed with sorrow, for in truth he was felicitating himself on the very graceful way in which he had conducted himself during the interview. He had reason, perhaps, to be pleased with himself; but then a man very much in love would not have been in a self-gratulatory mood at finding that he had spoken before the lady was ready to give him a favourable answer.

As for Sybil she went back pale and spiritless to her father’s room, determining to forget the doctor until the time came for decision.

Mrs. Haldane and Bessie stayed till late, and after they had gone Sybil sent Elspeth to rest while she took her place beside her father. She sat beside him in silence till the darkness warned her that night had come.

‘It is time for your medicine, dear,’ she whispered. ‘I heard Sandy take it to Elspeth an hour ago. I will run down and get it.’

She went lightly down the stairs to the wainscoted room. It was quite dark, and she hurriedly lighted a candle and looked about for the bottle.

The candle flickered in her hand, for the open window let in the night air and made the room damp and chill as a vault. Sybil’s teeth began to chatter, less with fear than with cold, and a shudder passed through her.

The medicine was evidently not in the room, and she turned to go out again when she stopped. What was that noise at the window? She glanced half fearfully over her shoulder, and then stood turned to stone.

A face white and ghastly was peering into the room, with great eyes of fear and terror. The cheeks were pale and sunken, the mouth haggard and drawn. And yet it was a familiar face. Where had she seen it before?

With a horrible dread at her heart, she moved slowly round until she faced it. Then, in spite of the havoc wrought on it, she recognised it!

CHAPTER V.

ELSPETH SMELLS DEATH.

‘There have been
Moments when all the world was in our praise,
Sweeter than any pride of after-hours.’

HER first impulse was to fly; but she remembered in time that such weakness might expose him to danger, and she turned back into the room.

‘Oh, why are you here? Don’t you know that you may be arrested any moment? They have a warrant,—they are looking for you.’

‘I don’t care,’ he said, recklessly. ‘I must see you once more. I must speak. Let me come in, dear. Sybil, Sybil, I can’t go away and leave you angry with me.’

His haggard eyes were full of entreaty, and even in her terror the girl was aware of some great change in him. His icy reserve had broken up before a rush of passionate feeling; and in his very tone she heard his love for her, and was conscious of a wild triumph in hearing it.

He loved her! And even in that moment of dread her heart answered to his.

‘Hush, hush!’ she whispered, going to the window. ‘They will hear you. I will let you in, but you must wait till I have locked the door.’

She drew the iron bar across the door; and then he stepped in through the low

window and closed the shutter that no one passing through the garden should see him. Then he turned to Sybil.

‘Oh, why have you come back?’ she cried, clasping her hands. ‘What can have brought you back? The risk! the risk!’

In her fear for him Alec saw her love, and he strode across the room, his triumphant air more befitting a conqueror than a criminal, and caught her hands.

‘Sybil, do you love me?—can you?’

She made no attempt to free herself, and she was altogether without girlish embarrassment as she looked up into his face.

‘Yes,’ she said, proudly, ‘I do love you. I have loved you since the night you saved me. But this is no time for

love. You must go! Don't you know that every moment is precious?' .

'I know nothing but that you love me!' he said, masterfully, bending to meet the face raised to his.

His kiss lashed Sybil into a memory of her renunciation of his love, but she recklessly ignored the past. She only remembered that he was in danger, and that she had brought him back into grave peril.

She flung her arms round him, and looked appealingly into his face.

'Alec, you must go,—for my sake you must go. You can think what you like, only don't stay another moment.'

'Then it was all a mistake about Rutherford?' he said, quietly, regardless of her pleading. 'You are not going to marry him?'

‘No,—never! never! Oh, do go. Why did you come back?’

‘I have five minutes longer,’ he said. ‘I am escaping to Spain to-night, but I couldn’t leave without seeing you once more. Do you know that your last words to me were, “I almost hate you”?’

‘Yes, yes,’ she cried, excitedly, ‘it was not true!’

‘No; so, by-and-by, when you have got over your grief will you come out to me? We can begin life again in another country.’

Sybil looked wildly at him.

‘You thought daddy was dead!’ she cried. ‘No, he is better, he will get well. I can’t think of the future while you are in danger. I know you are innocent, but other people think—they think——’

‘I know,’ he said; ‘but so long as you trust me——’

While he held her in his arms, there was a knocking at the door. They started apart, and Sybil sprang to the candle and extinguished it.

‘The window,’ she cried, hoarsely, ‘quick!’

He needed no second bidding, and while she went to the door, and affected to undo the bolt, he felt along the wall for the shutter. It appeared to be stiff, and, try as he would, he could not unfasten it. At last a spring yielded, and a rush of damp air filled the room.

He stepped through the aperture.

‘All right,’ he called, under his breath.

There was a sharp click as the bolt fell again into place, and Sybil threw open the door. The light from the hall-lamp showed

her face ghastly, and at the sight of her Elspeth started back.

Sybil laughed strangely at the old woman's terror.

‘Don't be frightened, Elspeth; I came in for daddy's medicine and the room was dark. Why didn't you open the door? were you afraid?’

‘Afraid?’ said Elspeth, ‘na, na; I'm no the meenister wi' his heid sae fu' o' ghaist an' speerits he hasna room for common-sense. An' I'm no Sandy wha has sae muckle releegion he hasna ony ither thing. Toots! What hae you been daein' wantin' the cannell, lassie?’ She went into the room sniffing suspiciously. ‘Ech, sirs! an' what an awfu'-like smell i' the place! It minds me——’ She hurried again to the door, seized Sybil's arm and dragged her down the passage. ‘Come awa', my bairn,

come awa'! Guid save's, but yon's the death-smell. There'll be a coffin i' the hoose before the week's past.'

Sybil laughed hysterically, glad to divert Elspeth's suspicions.

'Daddy is better,' she gasped. 'And you and I, we don't look like dying yet a while.' She could scarcely breathe, but still she went on. 'How is it you were not in your room, Elspeth?—and the place all in darkness?'

'I was called awa', ' Elspeth explained, 'an' there's ne'er a lassie will gae tae that room i' the gloamin'. I hae been seekin' you a' places, dearie. The meenister an' his leddy fra Auchinblae cam in by a whilie syne. They're sair pit aboot, puir creaturies. Wull they bide here the nicht, think you?'

'Surely,' said Sybil, the blood rushing

to her face. 'Tell Jean to make the green room ready, and order some dinner. And—Elspeth—don't tell daddy they are here. I'll just give him his medicine, and then go down.'

'He's had the drappies, an' is soondly sleepin'. I'll sit beside him till you win back. Gae you tae your freends. Yon's a meenister, but I'm dootin' mebbe he has a heart.'

With knees still shaking from excitement and terror, Sybil went slowly towards the drawing-room. How could she meet Alec's father and mother with no assurance of his innocence beyond her own conviction? In their hurried interview his innocence had been taken for granted, yet what could explain his flight but guilt? Was it possible that he was shielding the real criminal? Could it be that Gordon had

taken the bonds? Terrible as was this suspicion, Sybil might have harboured it had the missing deeds not belonged to Miss Prissie. But it was impossible that her father could have betrayed that old friend! She could not insult him by deeming him capable of such baseness. And yet Alec was innocent!

She could not unravel the difficult skein; and now she had to meet the parents whose pride in their son had been brought low.

She opened the door and went into the room, and as they saw her the two rose and Mrs. Macdonald hurriedly came forward.

Sybil threw her strong arms round her, and held her close.

‘He is innocent,’ she cried, proudly. ‘Oh, Mrs. Macdonald! you can’t believe he is guilty!’

‘No, no, dearie, no, no! But never yet

have the Macdonalds had a word of blame, and to think that my laddie——’

The old lady’s voice failed, and the slow passionate tears of a great sorrow rolled down her face.

Sybil kissed the faded cheeks, and smiled across at the minister.

‘He’s not guilty, you know, dear, so it can’t matter. He will come back without a hint of reproach.’

She lifted up her head triumphantly, and her eyes flashed. Not since she had heard Maggie Millar’s story had she felt so proud and glad; and her trust transfigured her face, and made it radiant.

‘Now, God bless you for those words!’ said the minister, sinking again into a chair. And the clouds cleared from his face.

‘And do you say that, dearie?’ Mrs.

Macdonald asked, wiping her eyes to look at the girl. 'Then it's bound to be true. A woman has keener eyes for her lover even than a mother for her laddie. And you love my Alec, dearie?'

'Yes,' Sybil said, simply, without fencing or hesitation.

Her lover's dishonour had unlocked the lips closed by her mother's sin. If Alec had been prosperous and happy, she would not have confessed her love. Now that the cloud hung over him, she proclaimed it.

She led the old lady to a sofa, and the minister came too, and Sybil sat between them, giving a hand to each. And there these three unsophisticated souls sat glorifying the man who had nothing, apparently, but their love to justify their confidence in him.

'I never believed he had gone wrong;'

Mrs. Macdonald smiled. 'Toots ! a silly auld wife not to trust her laddie !'

'Ay,' said the minister, shaking his head. 'We should have stopped at the manse and taken no notice of the charge. The lad couldn't go wrong. He'll come out of this with a clear character, as Miss Sybil says. It would kill me if it could be proved against him.'

Mrs. Macdonald gave her husband a look that had in it a sort of pride in his sensitiveness.

'Yes,' she said. 'If the laddie hadn't been innocent it would have killed his father. Thank God he is proved innocent.'

Sybil choked back a sob. The mother's assurance that had no stronger foundation than a girl's trust in her lover was a pathetic thing to see.

But she talked gaily with them for an

hour: and they had a festive little meal together, during which they all forgot their anxieties and made light of the trouble that three hours before had seemed overwhelming. She did not tell them of her interview with Alec, but made the most of every point in his favour, and at last they went to bed comforted, and left her free to return to her father.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

‘Speechless, while things forgotten call to us.’

GORDON was asleep, and Sybil sent Elspeth away to rest while she seated herself to watch beside him.

‘I’ll no gae tae my bed just noo,’ said Elspeth. ‘I’ll pit a bit o’ fire i’ the wainscot-room, an’ gin you’re needin’ me you will cry me ben the room.’

‘Oh, I’ll not need you, Elspeth, I’m sure. But if you make a fire there I

might come down by-and-by if I feel cold.'

'Ay, do, lassie. Robert Gordon's gey weel the nicht. Likely you'll no stap beside him a' nicht. Weel, I'll hae a guid fire for you, ony gait.'

'But the death-smell, Elspeth!' said Sybil, mischievously.

'Toots!' said Elspeth, hobbling away.

Sybil was glad to be alone to think over the events of the past twelve hours.

It had been an eventful day, crowded with more emotion than she had known in all her twenty years of life. There had first been the wearing anxiety for her father, then the sudden shock of Bessie's tidings, followed by her interview with Dr. Rutherford, and all the common-place detail of life up to the time when she had met Alec and declared her love. She had

gone from that meeting to the one with his father and mother. The day was past now, and she could measure its loss and gain.

But she was not left long in solitude to meditate as she wished. About one o'clock she was startled by the scared face of Elspeth beside her.

She put up her finger to enjoin silence, and rose and went into the passage before she spoke.

'I am not cold, nursie. You should not have come up.'

Elspeth laid a chill hand on the girl's mouth.

'Whisht, whisht, lassie!' she whispered. 'I'll just sit beside you, for there's some uncanny thing i' yon room. I'm no feart, but it's wae tae bide a' my lane wi' tappins an' whispers an' callins roond aboot me.'

Sybil's thoughts at once flew to Alec.

‘Tappings and callings, nursie? What did you hear?’

‘I canna tell you, lassie. I was i’ my chair, an’ mebbe noddin’ some; but, however, it wasna lang before the slumber left me. Eh, bairn! the death-smell is awfu’, but the tappins for the deid—! Saft, saft they cam, an’ I thocht it was my ain heart beatin’,—but no! Owre an’ owre I heard the little knock, knock, an’ then the ca’, “Sybil, Sybil!”’

‘What!’ Sybil cried.

‘Oh, my lammiel, I’m wae tae tell you. It maun hae been for Robert Gordon’s wifie, Sybil she was—your pair mither. She canna be deid efter a’;—they tappins dinna soond for the deid; an’ it canna be for you. A wee chappin’ at the wa’ it was, an’ “Sybil, Sybil,” vera saft an’ sma’-like.’

Sybil's face had grown white. She knew well enough that the sounds that had frightened Elspeth were not from the spirit world—Alec must have returned, unable to get away, and must have come back to her for help. She must go at once—but how to get rid of Elspeth?

‘Nursie, you must have been dreaming,’ she laughed. ‘Had you a fire?’

‘Ay, a gey guid fire, an’ I could see weel there wasna onybody i’ the room beside mysel’.’

‘Then if there’s a fire I’ll go down and get warm. Feel how cold my hands are. You will stay beside daddy, and maybe I will go to sleep. I shall lock the door to keep the spirits out, and if I hear anything I can tell you in the morning.’

‘Na, na, lassie, it’s no richt——’

‘Toots, you were dreaming, Elspeth.

It's not like you to be superstitious. Any way, I'll go and get warm. I'll not stay if I am frightened, be sure. And don't you leave daddy a moment ; he must have his medicine as soon as he wakes.'

She walked quickly down the passage and at the end turned to nod at Elspeth. The old woman stood uncertainly watching her. She was not convinced that she had been dreaming, but perhaps that was the explanation of the sounds she had heard. Elspeth was not superstitious, and she preferred that explanation to none, and finally went contentedly enough to her watch.

The wide old staircase was in darkness, but Sybil hurried down, anxious to get to the room before Alec should give up his futile efforts to make her hear.

A band of light from the wainscoted

chamber fell across the hall ; and the sight of the lighted room recalled her good sense and banished the nervous terror she had felt in the dark passage.

She went in softly, taking the precaution to bolt the door after her, and then she paused listening.

Her pose in the firelight made a rare picture ; and the parted lips, clasped hands, and white face of the girl had the effect of an embodied silence shining whitely against the carved background of the wainscot.

She stood there listening ; but her heart was beating so quickly, that at first she heard nothing. Her breath came with difficulty, and a loud whirring in her ears drowned every other sound.

In the room there was the stillness of death ; and after a time she became calmer, and persuaded herself that Elspeth had

really been dreaming. She was growing sleepy herself, and, everything being quiet, drew the arm-chair near the fire and seated herself.

She had scarcely done so when a strange sound jarring through the silence made her start and sit up. There, unmistakably, was the low, guarded tapping ; and by-and-by she heard her own name called very cautiously.

‘Sybil, Sybil, are you there? Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, yes,’ she cried aloud. ‘Wait ; I am coming.’

She sprang madly to the window. The shutters were closed, and her shaking fingers could hardly unbar them. At last the bolt slipped back ;—she threw them wide, and then—a blast of cold air rushed in and extinguished the candle.

The dim glow of the fire was not sufficient to penetrate into the darkness, and she trembled with terror and excitement. Surely Alec could not be far away; he must have seen her in the momentary light. Why then did he not come?

She leaned out of the window calling softly,

‘Alec, I am here. It is I,—Sybil.’

She waited a moment, but he did not answer. Had he slipped away not knowing who had answered his cry? She called again, but without getting a reply; and after an instant’s hesitation she stepped through the low window on to the path.

The night was pitch dark. Even had Alec been there, she could not have seen him; but she ran along the path calling to him in a quiet voice.

The wind stirred the trees and shivered

in the branches; but no other sound answered her as her white dress flashed in and out among the shadows.

She was just returning to the house, when Don's deep bark rang out, and she ran forward to the kennel. Alec was not there, and she unloosed the dog, and, with him at her heels, scoured the garden up and down, in the shrubbery, among the trees, everywhere. But no one was to be seen.

At last she was obliged to conclude that she had imagined the call, and she gave up the search and went back with Don to the house. She gained the room and closed the window, the shutters meeting with a clash, and had just found the matches when once more she heard the tapping and the voice calling her name. Don, too, heard it, for he gave a low growl

as the matches fell from Sybil's shaking fingers.

‘Hush, sir;—quiet!’ she called aloud, groping for the box.

She found it after a time, and lighting a match looked round in a terrified bewilderment.

There was no one in the room, no one at the unshuttered window; and yet the unmistakable tapping continued. She knew now that the sounds were not imaginary, for Don was sniffing at the air and growling still.

Sybil's blood ran cold. Could it be, after all, that Elspeth was right—that it was the death-call she heard?

She would not give way to the superstitious feeling, and she shook herself and broke into a laugh to rid herself of the terror. The sounds were connected with

Alec she was certain, and she determined to wait until they were further explained. So she sat down on the hearthrug beside Don, and threw her arms round his neck.

The action recalled the time when she had kept watch with the keeper's dog in the glen, and she remembered how her song had then brought Alec to her.

She began to sing as she had done then, and was half way through the verse when she sprang to her feet in a paroxysm of terror. Instead of the cautious tapping, there was a loud battering at the wall; instead of the whisper, a strange muffled shout,

‘Sybil, Sybil! Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, yes!’ she gasped. ‘Where are you?’

‘Here! Behind the wainscot.’

At the words, she gazed round helpless-

ly, uncertain from what quarter the voice came. But Don decided the question by bounding to the side of the room, where he stood wagging his tail and looking from Sybil to the wall whence the voice had come.

Sybil crossed the room, and knocked at the wainscot softly.

‘Hush! hush! don’t make any more noise. I am here, I will let you out.’

‘Quick!’ he shouted. ‘The spring is near the window. Press along the wainscot till you find it.’

Trembling with excitement Sybil examined the wall, pressing every inch of oak in wild eagerness, terrified lest she should not be able to release Alec before the breaking day made his escape impossible.

But at last the spring yielded to her

pressure ; the weighted door fell back, and a musty air filled the room with what Elspeth had called the death-smell. Through the aperture Alec stepped, covered with dust and cobwebs, his face white as that of the dead.

Sybil sprang forward with a glad cry, but at the sight of his starting eyes and maddened gaze she fell back in terror and shrank from him when he advanced. But Don was not so easily frightened, and he leaped round Alec in riotous welcome.

Alec put out his hand unsteadily and touched him, and then he held out his arms to Sybil.

‘ Oh, Sybil ! What have you saved me from ? ’

‘ What ? ’ she cried, thoroughly frightened at his wild gaze.

He opened his lips, but his dry tongue

refused to frame the words he would have spoken.

Six hours passed in that living tomb with a human skeleton had almost unhinged his reason. He came to himself at the sight of her terror.

‘Sybil, don’t look so,’ he said; ‘I have only been in the secret chamber.’

He stopped, and turning suddenly drew the wainscot again into place. The spring caught with a snap, and as if relieved he looked again towards her.

‘That’s been an awful “experience,”’ he said, with a queer smile. ‘Thank God it is over. In another hour I should have been mad.’

Still Sybil made no answer; his strange appearance and excited manner holding her silent. He looked at her in surprise.

‘Dear, you are not frightened at me? I

am all right now. I only want a plunge into cold water to restore my senses and get rid of these cobwebs. And—Sybil—I am so hungry.'

He gave her a comical look of appeal, and at his 'prosaic tone she recovered her wits.

'You have been locked in the secret chamber! Oh, Alec, you might never have been found!'

'No, I should have perished like that other poor creature. But I'll tell you about that afterwards. Now, where can I find soap and water?'

'I will bring them here,—you must not go out of the room,' she cried; and she went out hastily and returned with everything necessary.

While Alec washed, she explored the larder, and he was soon seated before a hurriedly prepared meal.

He ate ravenously, for he had tasted nothing since the day before, and she watched him in silence for a minute or two, with mingled feelings of thankfulness for his escape and anxiety for his safety. At last he looked across at her smiling.

‘You have saved my life. We are quits.’

She smiled back at him. The homely tasks had restored her courage. The sight of Alec as she had been accustomed to see him, his appetite, and the strange experiences of that night made her defiant of everything but love. She did not forget that he was in hiding, but she was convinced of his innocence, and was prepared almost to welcome the conditions which had made it possible for her to reveal her love. They were together again, and she would enjoy the happiness fortune had

sent her. So she looked into his face with a grave smile.

‘It is Elspeth who really saved you. She heard you calling, and thought it was a ghost.’

He shuddered.

‘If you had not come, I should have been mad before morning. I must have pressed the spring in feeling for the window in the dark. When the door opened I stepped through, thinking I was going into the garden. As soon as the spring snapped, I felt the musty air; but it was too late then. I called to you, but you didn’t hear. Then I struck a match, and saw that I was in a tomb with a ghastly—’

‘A what?’ Sybil asked, eagerly, when he paused with a sick look of loathing.

‘A—— Oh, I can’t tell you now. Some other time.’ He rose from the table,

and came round to her, and took her face in both his hands, looking sorrowfully into her eyes. 'Darling, I must go. How can I say good-bye to you?'

'But where are you going to? Is it safe?' she asked, anxiously.

'Yes, if I get away at once. I shall walk to North Berwick and take the Edinburgh train and get on to Newhaven. There I'll cross to the continent, where I shall be safe.'

Sybil met his look sadly.

'Alec, is it necessary to run away? *Must* you go? Can't you stay and explain? I know you didn't take the bonds, but you know something about them. Can't you tell what you know?'

He shook his head.

'It is quite impossible. But it doesn't matter so long as you know I am inno-

cent. It was quite worth coming back for, dear.'

He stooped and kissed her, and she threw her arms round his neck and clung to him.

'Alec, tell me why you are doing this? Why should you pretend to be guilty when you are innocent?'

'I can't tell you; don't ask me, Sybil. You must trust me.'

'I do, I do,' she sobbed; trembling as a terrible suspicion again recurred to her. For whom would Alec make this great sacrifice but for her father? Yet she could not give voice to her fear, and terror lest it should be true kept her dumb.

Her face was white with despair, and Alec kissed her passionately.

'It is not so hard now I know you love me,' he said. 'Some day all this will be

cleared up, and then——’ He held her close, feeling her tremble in his arms. ‘Good-bye, my own little girl.’

The grief in her eyes almost unmanned him, but she did not weep.

‘Alec, you must go,’ she whispered at last.

‘Yes. Sybil, you will go to the manse and comfort them? If I could only have seen my mother again!’

‘They are here. I should have told you. They came to-night;—they are certain of your innocence.’

‘I knew they would be! And they are in the house now? I should like to see my mother again.’

His eyes made a request that Sybil was loth to grant, but she could not deny him anything.

‘Take off your boots and come softly,’

she said ; and he followed her silently to the room.

There she gave him the candle she carried, and waited in the passage till he came out again.

‘ They were fast asleep,’ he whispered, ‘ but when I kissed her, mother called my name.’

They went in silence to the wainscoted room, where he put on his boots again, took his hat, and looked wistfully at Sybil.

‘ You will be good to them, dear ?’

Her lips quivered, and he kissed them over and over again.

‘ It is good-bye,’ he said, hoarsely. ‘ Sybil, you have never kissed me.’

She lifted her face and kissed him on the mouth. Then he put her away, and stepped to the window and out into the breaking morning.

At the end of the path he looked back and could just make out the white figure standing in the window. Then he was gone.

The stillness of the morning was all about Sybil, that pale wonderful silence mute with promise of the day. She stood motionless, till the stirring of bird and leaf told her that day was at hand, and then she turned her white face to the skies. They flushed and trembled round the pallid gleam of a star that fainted and died even while she watched. Then, while the lonely heavens sent a sharp pain of desolation to her heart, a shaft of light shot upward, and over the sea 'God made Himself an awful rose of dawn.'

CHAPTER VII.

A COUNSEL OF IMPERFECTION.

‘With yet worse sorrow can any morrow be laden?’

THEY were all in the drawing-room—Mrs. Haldane and Bessie, Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald, Sybil, Miss Prissie and Miss Prue; gathered together to discuss the one topic. Alec had been taken that morning in Edinburgh, and was under arrest, bail having been refused.

His father and mother sat side by side, holding each other’s hand; very white but

calm in confidence of their laddie's innocence. Mrs. Haldane was on an oak chair opposite, triumphing in the vindication of her views on human nature; while Bessie had her arm round Sybil, and was alternately indignant and sympathetic.

Miss Prissie and Miss Prue were on the sofa, the shaking of their curls significant of the degree in which they were moved. They had changed their white shawls for black ones, a delicate compliment to the presence of Alec's parents at the Towers.

'For an arrest is much the same thing as a death,' said Miss Prissie; 'only more economical as regards new mournings.'

Miss Prue was crying softly, but Miss Prissie's eyes were dry and bright, and a red stain burned on her cheek.

'I don't believe a word of it,' she was

saying: ‘and if I had my way there shouldn’t another mention be made of those bonds. Sister and I have enough to be comfortable, and what’s a bit of siller beside the trouble that’s come on all who knew the laddie? A fortune lost is better than a misfortune gained, and it’s a sair misfortune gin you canna trust your neighbours. I’m not to lose my faith in good birth and religious training. He’s a son of the manse, and couldn’t go wrong, and so I told the inspector. “Sir,” said I, “for the sake of the town’s morals the prosecution must be stopped.” I appealed to him from the highest ground, and sister met him on the lowest, for she used three handkerchiefs while we talked. But, eh, dearie, she might have used all the handkerchiefs in Dunbar, and I might have

.

quoted all the Shorter Catechism, and it wouldn't have touched his marble heart. "Justice must be done," says he. Justice, forsooth! When a man hasn't got religion, what can he know of justice?"

Miss Prissie's curls bobbed indignation, and Miss Prue sniffed disconsolately.

'He is right,' said Mrs. Haldane, with a snort of pity at Miss Prissie's young faith in humanity. 'Justice is the pivot on which social life revolves. In these days of law and democracy, birth and training go for nothing—especially training.'

She spoke with conviction, as of one having experience of these beautiful social dreams.

Mr. Macdonald gazed at her with simple dignity.

'Madam, I ask for justice for my son. He will then be free.' Then he turned to

the two Miss Dixons. 'I thank these ladies for their trust in my boy, and for their tears.'

He bowed with old-fashioned courtesy, and the sisters prinked and bowed in return in the most genteel manner, while Miss Prissie nudged Miss Prue, whispering :—

'A most courtly old gentleman! Don't sniff so, sister. Ah, this generation has fallen sadly behind in manners. With such a father, there's no doubt that young lad is innocent.'

'I think we all believe in him, dear Mrs. Macdonald,' said Sybil, with a little break in her voice.

'I know I do for one!' said Bessie, stoutly, while Miss Prissie and Miss Prue nodded gently.

'And,' Sybil continued, 'though he is

under arrest, he cannot be convicted. God will surely bring the truth to light.'

'He will! He will!' sighed the minister.

'If He doesn't, it will kill my husband,' said Mrs. Macdonald, with evident pride in his inability to struggle against sorrow. 'Eh, dearie, dearie! If a Macdonald was sentenced to penal servitude, it would break his heart.'

'That can't happen!' Bessie cried. 'No man could stand by and let the innocent suffer wrongfully. Men may be selfish, but they are not so inhuman as all that.'

'Aren't they?' grunted Mrs. Haldane. 'You know nothing about human nature. For instance, look at——'

She stopped, and the sudden silence had all the force of emphasis. Conscious of

meaning in the pause. everyone looked up to see Gordon leaning on his stick in the open door.

There was no colour in his face, and he came slowly towards them, looking shaken and old.

Sybil sprang up and put her arm round him.

‘Daddy! you ought not to have left your room.’

He put his hand on her shoulder leaning heavily on her.

‘I thought I would surprise you,’ he said, with a ghastly attempt at jocularly; ‘but you have surprised me. What does it all mean? Who is in danger of penal servitude? What has happened?’

His glance round the room included, without specialising, Bessie; and the girl who had flushed and brightened at his

entrance hung her head and affected unconcern.

Sybil entreated silence by a glance, while she tried to divert Gordon from the subject of Alec, but her efforts were unsuccessful.

‘It is wrong to keep your father in ignorance,’ said Mrs. Haldane. ‘No, Sybil,—no, Bessie, I shall not hold my peace. Mr. Gordon ought to be told the untrustworthiness of the false man in whom he placed such confidence.’

‘Mother, he saved my life!’ burst from Bessie.

She had risen, and, forgetting Gordon, stood with blazing cheeks before her mother, furious in her indignation.

‘Bessie, be quiet! To see you, one would suppose you took some special interest in that bad young man.’

‘I don’t care what you think! You may think I love him if you like—it doesn’t matter to me,’ she cried, excitedly. ‘He saved my life, and I am grateful to him, and proud to know he is one of the bravest and best men I ever met!’

Gordon listened with a curious smile on his face.

‘Et tu, Brute?’ he said to himself, bitterly. ‘I thought I had found a woman who could be faithful, but it seems she is as fickle as the rest. Well—everything is gone, let her go!’

‘You should be ashamed to speak so of a common thief!’ said Mrs. Haldane, acridly.

The minister and his wife had also risen, and Mrs. Macdonald gripped her husband’s hand at the words; but the noble benevolence of his face was unchanged as he turned to Mrs. Haldane.

‘Ma’am, I can’t think you know you are speaking of my son!’

Gordon gazed from one to the other.

‘What the dickens does it all mean?’ he began, irritably, when Miss Prissie rose trembling with anxiety, and came across and laid her mittened hand on his shoulder.

‘I wish to say that I’d rather lose the value of the bonds ten times over, than let the law get hold of that young man—and his father a minister too! I have money—I can afford to let the siller go:—it’s your ain lassie that will want it, for sister and I have willed all we have to Sybil, dear heart. Yes, she is to have everything when we’re away; and you’ll just stop the prosecution and bring the laddie hame to his father.’

Gordon’s knees shook under him, and Sybil forced him into a chair.

‘Please be quiet everybody, and I will tell him. Daddy dear, some bonds are missing at the bank, and they have taken Alec—Mr. Macdonald—into custody.’

‘Why was it kept from me?’ Gordon asked, drily:

‘Because we were afraid of the excitement for you, dear. But they can’t condemn him. He would never have taken what was not his,’ Sybil said, earnestly.

‘It will kill his poor father,’ murmured Mrs. Macdonald.

Gordon pressed his hand to his forehead.

‘Why did they arrest—him?’ he asked, vaguely. ‘Who said he took them? He didn’t confess?’

‘Confess!’ interjected Mrs. Haldane. ‘His running away was confession enough. As soon as he knew the inspector was coming—the night before, in fact—he

escaped. However, he has been taken, (and I must say he is as big a fool as he is a knave to have tried to escape from Edinburgh!) and there's no doubt he will be convicted.'

'They can't condemn an innocent man!' Bessie exclaimed.

'Can't they indeed! The law has hanged many an innocent man for the murder he did not commit.' Mrs. Haldane seemed to gloat over this little idiosyncrasy of justice. 'They'll certainly give him twelve years at the least.'

The minister's wife sat down suddenly.

'Twelve years!' she cried, in a quavering voice, 'it will kill us both!'

Sybil crossed the room and tenderly put her arm round her.

'Courage,' she whispered. Then her clear young voice rang across the room.

‘Daddy! tell them no one can condemn him. Even the law would not have the heart to sentence these two to death through their son!’

Poor Sybil, her trust in the law was as humorous as it was pathetic! She gazed, as she spoke, at her father, and was infinitely relieved to find no signs of guilt about him. He looked worn and shocked, but not like a criminal whose place had been taken by an innocent man. He tottered to his feet.

‘I will go back to my room,’ he said, wearily. ‘As for Macdonald, he’ll get off right enough. As Miss Bessie says, the guilty man can’t stand by and let him suffer.’

He moved slowly to the door, Sybil supporting him; but when he reached his own room he drew away his arm.

‘That will do,’ he said irritably. ‘Go away now, Sybil, I have work to do. I must not be disturbed, even if Rutherford comes.’

‘Don’t do anything to tire yourself,’ she pleaded; ‘wait till to-morrow.’

She looked wistfully at him, but she was accustomed to a difference in his manner; and his reserve towards herself was too familiar to be painful.

‘No,’ he said, bitterly, ‘I have waited eighteen years already. “What thou doest do quickly;” to whom was that said?’

‘To Judas,’ she answered.

‘Was it? Curious that I should quote it now. Well, we are all Judases—traitors to ourselves. Come now, Sybil, I must be alone. Run away.’

‘How soon may I come back?’

‘Not for four hours. It is two o’clock. Leave me undisturbed till six. After that, I’ll let you have your way with me.’

His bent brows contradicted the careless words, and Sybil mistrusted him. She threw her arms round him with a burst of tears.

He did not repulse her, but his face became grey and cold.

‘What is the matter?’ he said, more gently. ‘What are you afraid of?’

‘I don’t know,’ she sobbed. ‘You look so ill, so frail, and old——’

‘Old, eh? Well, yes, I am an old man compared with Macdonald. Well, well—I was young once. I suppose you women can’t love a man when he grows old, and so——’

‘I won’t let you talk like that! You

are my own daddy—my own old daddy !”

She kissed him passionately once and again.

‘ You always loved your old dad, eh ?
You won’t forget him, even when you love
some one else—eh, Sybil ?’

He pinched her cheeks, smiling at the colour his words had called up ; and then he held her to him and gave her one of his old caresses, a long tender kiss that she never forgot.

‘ Good-bye, sweetheart.’

A minute later he had put her from the room and locked the door. He paced the floor slowly and wearily, knitting his brows and biting his moustache.

‘ Bessie called me selfish once,’ he muttered, ‘ but she would not think me capable of letting the innocent suffer for my evil,—ah, well ! Some day she shall know I

was not so bad after all . . . And yet if I thought she would ever love me . . . But what use? She is as fickle as the rest of them.'

He seated himself and wrote busily for an hour. After he had finished, he sealed the envelope and directing it to Sybil placed it in the davenport. He arranged one or two things about the room, and finally drew from his pocket the small bottle containing the drops he had taken the last time he had seen Alec. He stood weighing it in his hands, a curious smile on his face.

'Macdonald was willing to take my place when it simply meant living abroad for a time,' he said, meditatively. 'It will be a different thing when it comes to penal servitude. He won't break his father's heart just to save me. If they condemn

him the whole story will come out, and I shall look pretty foolish all round. Bessie would have nothing to do with me either, so in any case I lose her. Well, then it's just this: a painless death in all the glamour of self-surrender and atonement, and all the rest of it; or braving it out, public execration,—even Sybil couldn't forgive a thing like that;—and prison till the end of my days! There's not much choice left me, you see. And not much time either.'

He looked at his watch, hesitated an instant, and then poured the drops into a glass. After which he opened the window, threw the bottle far out and watched it fall where the undergrowth was thick in the shrubbery. Then he closed the window again, took up the glass and gazed at the contents.

‘Fool! you are a greater coward than I thought!’ he cried, fiercely. ‘Well, toss up! Heads, death; tails, dishonour.’

He tossed up a penny. It fell and showed the head. With a steady hand Gordon once more raised the glass

‘For Sybil’s sake. God forgive me.’

He drained the glass, and, rinsing it out with water from the carafe, set it in its usual place on the wash-stand. He drew from the davenport the letter addressed to Sybil and laid it on the blotter, then seating himself on the chair he rested his head on his hand, and waited.

He was sitting there still when, two hours later, Sybil knocked at the door. Receiving no answer, she turned the handle and found it locked.

‘Daddy,’ she called. ‘It is I—Sybil. If you are awake, let me in.’

Still receiving no answer, she went away. But she could not rest, and ten minutes after she returned to find the door still locked. She knocked again, and, his silence continuing, a great dread suggested itself.

What if the afternoon's excitement had proved too much for him? What if his weak heart——She dare not even formulate the thought, but she turned and fled down the long passage for help.

Dr. Rutherford was on the stairs coming up. She caught his hand, but her lips refused to utter a sound. He only needed to look at her face to know that something was amiss, and he sprang past and gained the door before her. Finding it locked, he knocked and shook the handle as Sybil had done. Then he turned and looked questioningly at her.

‘How long has it been locked?’

‘More than four hours,’ she said, through her white lips.

Without a word, the doctor gave the door a kick that burst it open.

‘Wait here,’ he commanded, and went in alone.

He walked to the davenport, and stooping laid his hand on Gordon’s shoulder and turned the face to the light. Then he raised himself, and drew a deep breath as he encountered the wild appeal in Sybil’s eyes. She had followed him into the room, and stood now at his side. Rutherford put his arm tenderly round her.

‘He is dead,’ he said, simply.

CHAPTER VIII.

SILENCE.

‘ Oh, thou dead body and damned soul !’

‘ MISSIE, you maun let me watch beside him the noo. It’s a’ that I can dae for my little lass,—an’ I promist that I wadna lat him rest till his soul wis savit. Eh, mon ! mon ! I’m dootin the time’s past, an’ if you’re no a child o’ grace the noo, a’ the luve o’ my little lass, an’ the prayin’ o’ the auld feyther, canna help you ! Guid save’s, missie, I hinna done ma duty fair by Robert Gordon.’

Beside the bed on which Gordon lay Sandy stood, with knitted fingers and quivering cheeks; his little beady eyes dim with grief, his voice trembling as he spoke to Sybil, whose face had grown old and worn during the time that had elapsed since Rutherford had told her her father was dead.

She was still numb from the shock she had received, but Sandy's words threatened to break up her stern composure. It was hard for her to see the old man's sorrow for the master who had wrought his greatest misery.

He stood there bewailing him and upbraiding himself for neglecting his promise to his little lass; and his grief tortured Sybil's already tortured heart.

Her father lay stiff and cold, straightened for the grave. The doctor had said the

excitement had strained the weakened heart and caused his death, and no one suspected that he had consciously attempted to take his life.

It was the morning after the terrible blow. Her friends had left her, all except Bessie Haldane, who, overwhelmed with grief, had locked herself in one of the rooms and begged to be left alone. Sybil was hardly conscious of Bessie's presence in the house. She could see nothing but the face on the bed, and even Alec's arrest had faded into colourlessness before the lurid flashes of that blinding sorrow.

But Sandy's grief touched her. He had lost his all, yet could forget his wrongs in sorrow for the man who had caused them. Sybil took his hands in hers.

'Sandy, Sandy,' she cried, but before she could say more Elspeth entered the room.

Her poor old face was pale with grief, but her eyes had not wept, and they were red and swollen with unshed tears.

She crossed the room and stood beside Sandy, looking down at Gordon; and she took the cold fingers in hers and smoothed them out as she had done when he lay a baby on her breast.

‘Ech, sirs!’ she said, brokenly. ‘And why, Sandy, suld you an’ me be left, an’ a mon like yon ta’en i’ the floo’er o’ his years? Eh, laddie! it isna but yestreen I took you fra your deid mither an’ gav you life at ma breist; an’ noo, though I wad dee for you, there’s nae strength i’ the auld frame to win you fra deith. Look weel at him, Sandy. Saw you ever siccan braw limbs for the grave?’

‘Ay, have I,’ said Sandy, stolidly, ‘my little lass——’

‘She was nobbut a bit floo’er, mon. But Robert Gordon’s a fine oak cutten aff i’ his prime.’

‘Elsbeth, don’t!’ Sybil moaned.

‘Na, na, my lammie. But I hae brocht you a bit comfort, for Robert Gordon’s left you a wee notie. I fand it the day, an’ it’s i’ your ain room gin you’re wishin’ tae read it.’

Sybil did not wait to question the old nurse. She turned and went with trembling limbs to her room, where she saw the letter her father had written the day before.

It was like a message from the dead, and she kissed the seal before she broke it. And then with a fluttering pain that was almost joy she began to read the words that would dash her into a hell deeper than she could

ever have imagined. But even then she did not weep.

Without faltering she read through his confession, with dry eye perusing the words that made him a felon: and at length her stunned brain grasped the thought that her worst fears were facts. The criminal whom Alec was shielding was her father!

Then the horror of her position burst upon her. She stood between father and lover, and must sacrifice one. Was she to proclaim her dead father's guilt—to blacken his name—to drag it through the mire?

The press eulogies on his character were scarcely dry. Was she to throw the vitriol of this confession on his fame, and burn and deface it for ever?

She might withhold it, and keep the secret to scarify her own life. But that meant to sacrifice Alec, to doom him to unmerited disgrace, and his parents to a bitter grief that must end in death.

She cowered at the hard task before her. One of the two must be sacrificed; and it was her hand that must plunge the knife into the heart of father or lover.

If the hours dragged to all in the darkened house where every footfall was hushed, and every wheel of life slowed to the march of death, who can tell how heavily weighted they were to Gordon, lying straightened for the grave, apparently dead, yet vividly conscious, acutely sensitive to everything that was going on? He had miscalculated the measure of the

curare he had taken, and it had done all but put the finishing touch that would have made its work perfect.

It had paralysed all the powers of motion, deadened the heart's action, frozen the limbs, yet left the man's spirit untouched, preternaturally sensitive—strung to an intensity of tortured agony such as he had never experienced before.

From the time when the cold stupor had crept over him, nothing had escaped him. He had heard Sybil knocking at the door, and had made ineffectual efforts to answer her. He had wrestled with that icy grip which made him dumb and helpless under Rutherford's examination, and had struggled vainly under the hands of the women who had prepared him for the grave.

He had listened to Elspeth and Sandy

lamenting over him, and had marvelled to know that Maggie's secret had been shared with her father.

Bessie's tears had fallen hot and burning on his face, and he had heard the words that told she loved him; and he had writhed in a futile effort to answer her. So his jealousy of Macdonald had been ill-founded, and she still loved him.

Then a thought had stung him into fiery anguish. What if his jealousy of his wife had been as ill-founded? What if she had not cared for Ladislav's friend, and the horrible crime he had committed had not even the sanction of his injuries in condonement?

In his agony he tried to rise and snap the fetters that held him; but he was powerless

under the sheet that lay on him, heavy as the leaden-weighted earth that would soon cover him.

The perfume of flowers was in the room ; the scent of roses and jessamine that made him sicken where he lay, waiting for the slow hours to drag by and bring that awful moment when he would be borne out—a living man to be laid among the dead.

And then a hideous mocking face leered at him ;—the face of his wife triumphing in the fate that had avenged her, and made his own hand deal to himself the doom he had dealt to her.

He had known that she was entombed in the secret chamber, a living woman face to face with a living death ; and he had reached no hand to save her. He in turn

was living and doomed, and he was powerless to avert his fate.

Once more he was waiting in silence while death triumphed. But now he, and not his wife, was the victim of his inaction. It would have been a relief to have lost his senses and become mad. But no! he must lie and gaze at the mocking leering faces; he must listen to the slow eternal tickings of the clock.

Slow as they were they went too quickly; for every one brought him nearer to the time when the nails would be driven into his coffin, and he, who had left his wife to a living death, should be left to the same death, beyond the power of imagination, horrible.

And now the silence became full of sound;—strange knockings, and cries, and

sobs ; and words that were living, stinging things.

‘ Robert, Robert, let me out. I am in the wainscot room, in the secret chamber near the window ! I am dying, Robert. Let me out, for Sybil’s sake ! ’ Then a harsh laugh,—was that his voice ? ‘ Don’t ask me to let you out—ask your friend, Ladislaw’s friend ; he would do anything to oblige you.’

Again the wailing cry dying, dying, fainter still ; and then silence !—the ghostly silence of Belhaven.

And the silence had lasted eighteen years ; and now, when he was himself an awful silence, it was broken !

He tried to pray, but no words would come ; and still the voices kept on their terrible iteration, and still the clock ticked.

He was not conscious of time. He could not count the days as they passed, but he knew the day of doom was nearing; for the scent of the roses and jessamine had been overpowered by the smell of pine wood that had been in the room ever since some heavy burden had been laid near the bed. Yes, the day was surely drawing near!

And there came an hour, surely the most weighted with horror of any human life, when he felt himself lifted and placed in his coffin; his frenzied attempts to move his frozen limbs utterly unavailing to check the fatal act. He tried to speak, to open his eyes, but neither sound nor motion answered his will.

The men did their work swiftly. The lid was placed above him, and he was left

to his agony—close to the awful moment when earth would claim and keep the living tortured clay.

And the Towers was held in a weird and solemn silence.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MINISTER'S LOVE STORY.

‘And now when all thy proud renown is out,
I am a watcher whose eyes have grown dim
With looking for some star that breaks on him,
Altered and worn and weak and full of tears.’

‘THERE’S the minister a-wantin’ you, my
lammie. He says he’ll no be keepin’ you
lang.’

Elsbeth had come into the room where
Sybil and Bessie were sitting. Sybil looked
up wearily.

‘Oh, I can’t see him. Ask him to excuse
me.’

'An' wad you show such disrespect to the meenister o' the parish?' Elspeth asked, indignantly. 'Na, na, come awa ben the room. Likely he may dae some guid to you;—mak a prayer mebbe; you canna tell. The English chapel has a prayer about meenisters haein' a speerit o' grace gi'en 'em, sayin' it wad tak the A'michty to work siccan a great marvel, an' mebbe He's workit it for Ladislaw. Come awa, my bairn, he'll likely hae a word o' comfort for your sair heart. Though I'm dootin', she added, under her breath, 'a' the comfort yon mannie's gotten is i' his mull.'

'You had better go, Sybil,' Bessie said, gently. 'He may have brought news of Mr. Macdonald. Perhaps he is discharged.'

Sybil rose uncertainly. Alec's discharge, she knew, lay with her, and whom better could she find to advise her than Mr.

Ladislaw, who would keep her secret?

Her face paled at the task before her, and she went to the drawing-room with a heavy weight at her heart.

The little man was walking up and down in a perturbed fashion. He had come to offer the church's consolation to the bereaved, and had expected to find Sybil weeping and heart-broken. Instead of this he faced a cold, still woman, 'whom grief had frozen into ice.'

She gave him her hand with a smile that staggered him, and put out of his head the words he had been preparing on the way to Belhaven. In vain he jogged his memory, he could think of nothing to say ; and after floundering helplessly in the mire of conventional sympathy he found himself in the midst of 'a good story.'

'I have just parted from Sandy Millar,

Miss Sybil. You'll know he's just a splay-footed chiel. He was stepping along before me, and he halted at the meeting of the three roads, and, says he, looking down at his feet : " The anc o' you's for gaein' tae Dunbar, an' th' ither wad tak me tae West Barns ; but I'll disappoint you baith, an' win tae Belhaven." Ah ! ah ! it was very guid ! He checked his laugh, and in some confusion took a pinch of snuff, for Sybil did not appear to be listening. ' I'd be very glad if I could help you in your trouble,' he said, looking up suddenly, and wondering what had made her face so hard and determined.

' I think you can,' she answered. ' I am all alone now—and I want some one to advise——'

Her lips trembled, and the minister's heart beat quickly at the sight of her

quivering face. It relieved him to see her in the mood for which he had prepared himself, and the consolations he had forgotten rushed back to his memory penetrated by a personal tone.

‘To be sure—yes, yes,’ he said, sympathetically, and his heart thumped so against his waistcoat that the safety of the snuff lodged on it was imperilled.

He dropped his eyes and studied the pattern of the carpet. Then he glanced up unexpectedly.

‘I’m only an old man, Miss Sybil, but if you will let me advise you—ta—take care of you now and for ever. Your father was my best friend, a brother to me——’

He stopped in his hurried words, and drew a long breath. Was this what he had intended to say to the girl? He was

too agitated to remember, but he went on bravely :

‘ I had the greatest respect for him, always. And, Miss Sybil, I have long cherished an affection for you. If you will accept me, I will give up everything for you.’

He made a gesture of renunciation whose dramatic effect was spoiled by the pinch of snuff held tightly between thumb and forefinger. But Sybil noticed nothing, gazing straight before her with eyes full of hard sorrow. She knew in a vague manner that Mr. Ladislaw was proposing to her, but she had lost all personal feeling in the thought that his words had closed her lips. She could not speak of her father's crime to his friend who ‘ had the greatest respect for him.’

‘ Thank you,’ she said, in a dazed fashion,

‘I know you will help me. I only ask for your advice. Can you arrange an interview for me with Mr. Johnson?’

Her practical words strangled the minister’s young romance. He even felt relieved that she took no notice of his proposal.

‘After all,’ he thought, ‘a young wife would have been a great responsibility and care ; interfering with my work.’

Mr. Ladislaw’s work was chiefly confined to burials, and cups of tea at the Miss Dixons’. He took his snuff briskly, and tried to get away from a lurking consciousness of disappointment.

‘I want to see Mr. Johnson, to-day,’ she said. ‘He would come at once if you called at the bank. May I trouble you so much?’

‘Surely, surely,’ said Mr. Ladislaw, glad to terminate the interview. ‘I’ll go immediately. Good-bye, my dear Miss Sybil: let us look always to Love that is stronger than death.’

He shook hands, and left Sybil standing at the window with a far-off look in her eyes.

Love that is stronger than death? Ah, yes! Her love was stronger than death, for it outlived the shame and sin of her father’s confession and made her eager to save his honour even at the expense of Alec’s. Her very love for Alec made her distrust the justice that bade her release him, and brand her father as a felon whom death had snatched from the hand of the law.

The inspector came at once in answer

to her summons; and Sybil's courage rose as she saw him.

With his stooping shoulders and deprecatory motion of the hands, his short-sighted and apologetic eyes, Fleming Johnson was not a man to inspire dread.

‘I wished to ask you if it is likely that Mr. Macdonald will be acquitted?’ she began, nervously.

Johnson shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his hands.

‘No, no, Miss Gordon. We don’t treat fraud so lightly.’

‘But they can’t prove it against him. There is no real evidence against him,’ she cried, excitedly.

‘He would have been hanged on less a hundred years ago,’ said Johnson, cheerfully.

‘And what will they do to him?’ she asked in a hoarse voice.

‘Give him twelve years;—perhaps less, most likely more.’

A cold shudder passed through the girl that prevented her speaking for the moment.

Johnson crossed the room and drew from his pocket a little parcel which he unrolled, disclosing a battered snuff-box.

‘There’s a beauty!’ he said, admiringly. ‘It belonged to John Wesley; no manner of doubt about it. Got it of an old lady whose mother heard him preach in the little whitewashed church by the shore. Do you know it?’

‘No,’ said Sybil, ‘but——’

‘Ah, you should go in. It’s the prettiest little place in Scotland, to my mind.

Stained glass, old oak, alcove from St. Giles's—beautiful! beautiful! And a slip of a lad for minister. However, he'll do;—he's all there, they tell me. Well, well, it's a sad thing about Macdonald; it'll be a blow to the old folk. And 'twas I got him in at Dunbar.'

The allusion to Alec's parents gave the clinch to Sybil's determination. Justice demanded that he should be freed; and her dead father's honour was a slight thing in comparison with the grief of the minister and his wife.

She sat white and cold and passionless, her hands so tightly clenched that the nails cut into the flesh; and in a fever of dread she watched Johnson carefully folding John Wesley's snuff-box and returning it to its place. When he looked up again she spoke.

‘ Mr. Macdonald is not guilty. I know who—who took the bonds.’

Her hesitating manner recalled the inspector's wandering attention; and he drew a chair near to her and peered short-sightedly into her face.

‘ And who might it be, young lady?’

Sybil drew Gordon's letter from her pocket and laid it before him without a word.

He took it in silence; and as he read a sudden change passed over his face which became eager, and cunning, and shifty in expression. When he had finished, he looked up with a benevolent smile.

‘ Well, young lady, I'm not to say it's not a clever dodge, but it's not worthy of Robert Gordon's daughter. You see, you couldn't get the young fellow off with a

cock-and-bull story like this. The law knows well what women will do and say when they're in love. It's plain to be seen that, your father being dead, this story has been hatched up to save the lad Macdonald. It shows a neat imagination—but it won't do.'

He shrugged his shoulders up to his ears and smiled forgivingly at Sybil, whose face flamed at his insolent stare.

'It is true,' she said, hoarsely. 'My father wrote the letter the day of his death. It was found afterwards.'

Johnson's face cleared with a singular triumph.

'You see,' he said, ingratiatingly, 'the whole thing looks like a plant. I'll put it to yourself. Macdonald's away, so are the bonds. Manager all right so long as the lad's safe. The moment he's arrested

manager dies, saying he took the bonds. You see how queer it looks. And then this confession. What does he say? Lost his fortune by speculation, and borrowed Miss Dixon's money to retrieve himself? Now, everybody knows Gordon was too canny to risk his money that way. Are you prepared to take oath this letter was written by your father?'

She bent her head, and Johnson sprang from his seat with quite unexpected alertness.

'Well,' he said, cautiously, 'if that's so, I'm not so sorry to know it. I've stood his airs down there at the bank till I'm sick of them. The bank might have been his by the way he bullied it. So this is the end of all his pride! I could wish he had been dragged through the mud and ruck of the court before he got

away. Twelve years would hae been too little for him.'

Sybil's bosom was bursting with the indignation she could scarcely repress ; but she told herself her suffering would be some expiation of her father's sin, so she listened in silence.

Her quiet aroused Johnson's suspicions.

'Where's the certificate of your father's death?' he asked, smoothly.

The implied accusation stung the girl's pride to action.

'Come this way please,' she said, rising ; and there was a dangerous ring in her voice.

With lifted head and firm step she went into the hall and up the staircase, Johnson slinking behind, his ears buried in his shoulders.

She threw open a door at the far end of

the passage ; and rubbing his hands eagerly he stepped in on tip-toe.

Inside the room, he paused and shrank back with a gesture of dismay. A coffin stood beside the bed, and on the bed itself was a form dimly outlined under the sheet.

Johnson shuffled back to the door.

‘I’ll not go in ;—never could bear the sight o’ death. There’s no need. I was never very friendly with him.’

He tried to open the door, but Sybil turned the key and held it ; an awful look on her set face.

‘You dared to question his death,’ she said, in a hard voice ; ‘and now you will look at him that you may never be able to suggest to others what you have been coward enough to say to me, his daughter.’

While he stood cringing before her,

shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, she stepped to the bed and removed the sheet.

Her eyelids quivered at the sight of the white, still face; but she gave no other sign of emotion while she stood waiting till Johnson had come near and given a swift scared glance at Gordon.

‘He’s dead, sure enough,’ he muttered, shuffling back. ‘But if he hadn’t been, I’d have brought down his damned pride—and yours too, young leddy! I’d have seen that he got twelve years’ penal servitude. I’d have given him up to justice, the rascal that he was!’

He went out closing the door noisily after him; and Sybil stood pressing her hands to her breast to keep back the threatening sobs; her face white and cold as that on which she gazed.

She started at a slight rustling behind her, and turned to see Bessie Haldane emerging from the window recess. Her eyes were red with weeping, and she threw her arms round Sybil with a burst of tears.

‘Oh, Sybil! I couldn’t help it. But what has he done? What did that horrid man mean? Justice? Penal servitude? Oh, Sybil, tell me what he has done?’

Sybil caught her breath painfully. Was this to be the way always? She who loved him most—was it she who was to blacken his memory and betray her father?

It was well for Alec that she was made of the stuff of the old Covenanters, and that the Puritan justice of her forefathers had come down to her in its strength; else she must have sacrificed him to her love

for Gordon. But underneath her tenderness was stout fibre ; a woman's force that held truth and right dearer than love. And she did not draw back, though Bessie's questions had crimsoned her cheeks with a passionate shame.

‘ Bessie, don't ask me anything. You will know soon. Alec did not take the bonds.’

Bessie lifted her head and gazed wildly at her.

‘ No, Sybil, no !’ she screamed. ‘ Don't say it was your father ! I won't believe it !—I can't ! And—and—oh, Sybil ! I loved him so !’

‘ Bessie !’

‘ Yes, yes ! I know you will hate me—but I didn't know ! I deceived myself. I didn't know till the night he nearly died.

And now he is dead—and I don't care who knows. Sybil, Sybil, he *can't* have done it! He never would! I will never believe he did . . . And if he did I would only love him the more,' she concluded, passionately.

Sybil's tears were falling by this time. She could only put her arms round Bessie and kiss her.

'Bessie,' she sobbed. 'We must comfort each other. Did you ever know anything so sad and terrible, Bessie? But he never meant to keep the money; he only borrowed it—and it was to save me from poverty—he said so—my own daddy!'

Her voice failed, and for some time only their sobs broke the silence of the room.

Gordon, lying listening, heard the clock

ticking with loud persistent voice between every sob.

‘It is awful that death should have come before he had time even to atone,’ Sybil said. ‘If he had lived, love and patience would have won him again to righteousness My poor daddy! He was not wicked, only weak; and he fell because he loved me.’

‘I loved him,’ Bessie sobbed. ‘If he had only lived . . . I don’t care if he took the bonds; it wasn’t stealing. If he had lived, I would have gone to the very ends of the earth with him. I don’t believe in a love that sacrifices nothing.’ She drew Sybil to the bedside, and knelt down, gazing yearningly at the marble face. ‘How noble he looks, Sybil! They say death is horrible, but it has only made him still. Sybil, did he move then? Oh,

God! what I would give to see his smile again!’

‘Bessie, hush! Would you call him back to pain, and shame, and disgrace? If he had lived, what would have been before him now? Thank God who took him!’

‘And his dear hand,’ Bessie continued, heedless of Sybil’s words. ‘Look, Sybil! how like marble! And I grieved him, pretending to make him a bad man; and all the while I loved him.’

In an agony of indecision Sybil stood listening. Ought she to tell Bessie that Maggie had loved and been deceived?

She could not! oh, she could not take away another’s faith in her father; and she stood in silence while Bessie lifted his hand to her lips and pressed remorseful kisses on it.

She seemed to have forgotten Sybil's presence; and, unable longer to bear the sight of her uncontrolled grief, Sybil went away to struggle with her own sorrow.

CHAPTER X.

THE FALSE AND THE TRUE.

‘ Her hope fell dead from her life.’

DR. RUTHERFORD called at the Towers the day after. He was anxious for an interview with Sybil, for he felt that their relations needed definition. He had told her he should come for her answer this week, and Gordon’s death made him eager that her answer should be favourable.

And yet the events of the past week

had not deepened his love for her. They had rather shaken it; for they had made her once more a stern-faced woman with eyes that lightened into the future, aloof and unattainable as the deep-orbed Sybil of the ancient cult.

His ideal of woman was the type feminine—soft, and yielding, and tender; with clinging lips and arms, and a charming dependence on man. Sybil was remote and cold, passionless as an iceberg; and though he could understand the strong love of a reserved nature it had no beauty for him. He saw nothing of the spirit that was moulding from the tragic forces of storm, and fire, and discipline, the new blossom of which her coldness was only the husk. Out of that rough calyx should come forth the perfect flower of a tender womanhood. But now it was winter with

her, and Rutherford had no high intuitions to discern the veiled spring.

Still she was not without attractions, and Gordon's heiress was worth the winning.

It was the day before the funeral, and he found Sybil by herself in the drawing-room.

He took a seat beside her, detaining her hand, and looked straight into her face.

'I have come for my answer, for I want to have the right to comfort you and help you bear your terrible sorrow.'

Sybil gazed before her with eyes that saw nothing.

'I had forgotten,' she said, slowly. 'I hoped you had forgotten.'

'Nay,' he smiled. 'How could I forget I loved you?'

'Wait!' she cried. 'Would you love

me if you knew that the very day you spoke to me I was listening to some one else ?’

‘ I could not help loving you if you told me you had listened to half-a-dozen,’ he said, comically. ‘ Poor beggar ! I am sorry for him !’

It did not enter into his calculations that Sybil might have encouraged the ‘ poor beggar.’

‘ I don’t care a straw about anything or anybody if you will only marry me,’ he went on. ‘ Your father wished it, I know.’

‘ Yes,’ she said, ‘ that is why I hesitated, I half promised.’

‘ Yes !’ he interrupted, triumphantly. ‘ He told me I had nothing to fear. Dear, you have made me very happy.’

‘ Stop,’ Sybil said. ‘ You are mistaken. I cannot marry you.’

He stared at her, and seeing the blank, white face turned from him, he trembled for his dream—the dream in which he had seen himself master at the Towers, giving good dinners; or travelling, with this graceful impressive woman always emphasizing his position. Sybil might not be tender, but she was a more imposing figure than little plump Bessie Haldane, with her red cheeks and doll's eyes.

He saw the vision again, and it inspired his reply.

‘Not marry me! Sybil, you cannot mean it. I love you too much to listen. I will never give you up.’

A bitter smile curled her lip.

‘You would give me up if my father lay in a felon's grave.’

‘Nonsense! What is the use of giving weight to the impossible? And, if it were

true, neither wrong nor shame would make me give you up !”

And he really meant it—the possibility was so remote.

‘ If I told you I loved some one else,’ she said, with difficulty.

‘ I should not believe it,’ he returned, gaily.

‘ If you knew I had lost all my money.’

He sat up sharply, then he fell back again laughing.

‘ Your father once mentioned his income to me. Men don’t lose fortunes in a day ; and besides——’

She turned her white face to him, and her eyes gave him an uncomfortable shock.

‘ He has lost everything ;—I am penniless.’

‘ Nonsense ! that must be an exaggeration,’ he said, quickly. ‘ Your father was

too good a business man. Your mother's fortune was secured to you.'

'I have no fortune—only misfortune,' she said, quietly.

The doctor's lips moved, but he saved himself from giving voice to the oath that was on them.

'It's a deuced awkward business,' he thought, savagely biting his moustache. 'What is to be done now?'

Sybil came to his help when his silence could be borne no longer.

'You see I am not worth loving,' she said, with a sad little smile. 'I don't think you ever loved me, Dr. Rutherford, or—or this would not have—mattered. You have not heard of Mr. Macdonald's discharge? Ah, when you know, you will be more than ever glad that I did not consent to be your wife.'

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She rose and gave him her hand, and he took it in a shame-faced fashion; for he was not without better impulses, and he knew in a dim unreal manner that Sybil's worth could not be measured by mere money.

A generous impulse urged him to tell her she needed love and protection more in her misfortune than in her fortune; but he checked it, for he could not afford to marry a penniless wife.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, hoarsely, with flaming cheeks. ‘Under happier circumstances——’

‘Yes,’ said Sybil, wearily. ‘Please don’t explain. I understand.’

The handsome doctor walked to the door with the air of a whipped cur; and, feeling infinitely small, hurried down the

avenue, conscious of Sybil's eyes following and despising.

That day Alec was discharged under surveillance, Gordon's confession having been accepted by the company.

He reached the Towers at dusk, and, seeing Sybil in the wainscoted-room as he passed, he stopped and knocked at the window.

She saw him at once, and flew to open the window, but when he would have kissed her she checked him.

‘Not again—not again,’ she cried. ‘It is all over.’

‘Is it?’ Alec said, masterfully. ‘Look here, Sybil, do you think all this terrible business can make any difference to me? You didn’t give me up when everyone

else thought me guilty, and you must not think you can give me up now. You belong all the more to me, dear; you know you do!’

‘No, no,’ she entreated. ‘Don’t tempt me, Alec; it is all over. I shall never marry. I shall never bring disgrace on your family.’

She stood facing him with beseeching eyes, and for answer he put his arms round her, and kissed her.

She was powerless to resist, and Alec kissed hair and eyes and lips before she could even speak. Then, still holding her, he looked down gravely into her eyes.

‘Sybil, you are mine, now and for ever. I will never give you up, and you dare not give me up for such a reason as you plead. My darling! Did you think my love was so base?’ She laid her head on his

shoulder, and he let her sob unreprieved. Then he drew her to a seat. 'Tell me about that night, if you can bear it.'

'There is so little to tell. When he found you were in custody, he wrote his confession. The excitement was too much for him. We found him dead at the desk an hour after.'

'I was afraid of that,' Alec said, sadly. 'I knew any excitement would be fatal. That is why I took the blame and went away to divert suspicion. You should not have made the confession public, Sybil. I could have shielded his good name. He was a noble fellow, though he fell into temptation.'

'He always liked you,' Sybil whispered, clinging to him. 'But that man—that Johnson——'

'He is a fiend!' Alec exclaimed. 'To

think such a quiet fellow, who poked about the bank apologising if he even looked at you, should develop into such a fury! I can't understand his hatred of your father. His only regret now is that death has stepped between him and the law. Thank God! he can't get hold of him.'

'Yes,' said Sybil, with quivering lips. 'He is quite safe. Oh, Alec, that I should ever be thankful for his death! The funeral is to-morrow. Will you come and see him before——'

They went upstairs together to the room where the candles had been lighted since dusk. As they entered, Sybil laid her hand, deathly chill, in his; and Alec turned and looked at her in surprise.

Her face had changed. Her eyes were rigid in their dark hollows, and were gaz-

ing wildly forward. Gordon had been placed in his coffin since she had last seen him, and the sight recalled the vision she had seen long before at Auchinblae—her father rising from a coffin and speaking.

They had left the door ajar, as she noticed in a fearful glance round, but at Alec's reassuring pressure she controlled her shaking limbs and advanced into the room.

Alec reverently moved the lid aside, and gazed silently at the man for whom he had risked so much.

The candles threw lurid lights across the white, upturned face, and deepened the shadows by curtained bed and window. All was weird and still; and the straight form in the coffin was invested with a noble solemnity.

They both remained silent for a time,

and then Alec turned and took the girl's hand in his.

‘Sybil, I want you here, in your father's presence, to promise to be my wife.’

‘Alec, don't ask me,’ she moaned. ‘I can't promise. If I refused before, I have a hundred times more cause to refuse now. Your mother would never forgive me for bringing dishonour into the family. I'll never love anyone else. But I can't marry you.’

Alec's lips opened, but the words died unuttered, for a numbness gripped his heart and held it in a terror too great for sound. He crushed Sybil's hand, and the two stood paralysed, white with horror; for there—before them—the shrouded form was moving, with hard-drawn breath and gasping sighs.

‘Alec, what is it!’ Sybil shrieked; and

he threw his arm round her while his eyes were held in an awful fascination on the coffin.

And then, slowly—shudderingly—Gordon sat up: his clammy eyes and blue lips, hideously grinning, stamping a new horror on his face.

CHAPTER XI.

THIS MORTAL——

‘ Whoso sucks a poisoned wound
• Envenoms his own veins.’

WITH chattering teeth Sybil clung to Alec, closing her eyes that she might not see her father rising from the coffin in which he had been placed for burial.

Alec’s face was as white as hers, and in a fascinated horror he kept his eyes on the shrouded figure. Some dread held him

silent, and he stood staring blankly at Gordon till the stillness was broken by his hoarse voice.

‘Sybil, I am not dead ; don’t be so frightened. And you, Macdonald, lend me your hand out of this hell.’

At the words Sybil lifted her head, and breaking from Alec’s arm sprang to her father’s side, and seized his hand.

‘It is true!’ she gasped, breathless in her relief. ‘He is not dead. Alec, shut the door,—lock it ! And come and help him.’

Alec needed no second bidding. Before she had finished speaking, he had bolted the door and was at her side, lending his strength to lift Gordon to the floor.

He accomplished his task, and Gordon stood erect, but shaking till the windows rattled in their frames. Then he slid

slowly down and lay in a swoon that was like death.

‘What is to be done now?’ Alec asked, with masculine helplessness in an emergency.

‘We must lift him on to the bed,’ Sybil cried, shrilly. ‘Then you go and bring Elspeth—no, I will. No one else must know that he is alive;—Alec! I almost wish he were not! Oh, what if Johnson should know!’

She wrung her hands, and a cold perspiration broke over her face.

‘No, no,’ Alec cried. ‘Don’t fret so, Sybil. He must not be taken,—it would be worse than death.’

‘It is Johnson,’ Sybil sobbed. ‘He is bent on punishing him,—he would hear no excuse. Oh, how can he escape now!’

Alec’s face fell. Gordon’s resuscitation

had indeed complicated the position. And yet, it seemed inhuman to expose him to the shame and ignominy of a felon's trial. He went over the situation, and only one way of escape presented itself.

‘If he could be got away to-night,’ he said. ‘There’s no fear of detection till to-morrow. But it is impossible to move him in his weak condition. We might hide him in the house, but Johnson is certain to search, and there is no safe place——’

‘Yes, yes!’ Sybil cried, excitedly. ‘The wainscoted-room—the secret chamber! Nobody knows of it but you and me. He could be hidden there for a few days. We must tell Elspeth, she will get it ready—and to-night—we must move him—when the servants are asleep.’

Alec looked up sharply.

‘That would be the very thing, but——’

He suddenly remembered that Sybil knew nothing of the skeleton with which he had spent the grisly hours of his detention in the secret chamber, and he checked himself.

‘It is a capital idea,’ he said. ‘I will go and arrange it with Elspeth—she will need help. Meanwhile we can make him comfortable on the floor.’

He adjusted pillows under Gordon’s head and covered him with blankets, talking rapidly all the time.

‘We ought to send for Rutherford. Is he to be trusted?’

‘No! there is only Elspeth. She will know what to do.’

‘Very well. You keep guard here, and I will go to her. When the room is ready I will come back. You are not afraid to be left?’

‘No, no. My poor daddy! Oh! Alec, how terrible it is!’

She stooped to touch Gordon’s brow, and Alec hurried away to the wainscoted-room to find Elspeth.

She looked up at his unexpected entrance, and let her knitting fall.

‘Guid save’s, laddie, it’s no yoursel’! An’ are you a free mon?’

‘Never mind me, Elspeth,’ he cried, cheerily. ‘I want a place where a man may hide, and there’s a secret chamber in this room.’

‘An’ hoo dae you ken that?’ she asked, looking suspiciously at him over the rim of her glasses.

‘I will tell you afterwards. I want you to help me now. What sort of a nerve have you—strong?’

‘Hoots, toots ! Nerve indeed ? Me that has served twa generations of Gordons to be askit what like nerve I hae gotten !’

‘Don’t be offended, Elspeth. You will need all you can muster now. Did you ever see a skeleton ?’

‘Weel,’ said Elspeth, cautiously. ‘Mebbe I hae, and mebbe I hinna. But I hae bided with ane a guid saxty-aucht year.’

‘That’s likely enough, for there has been one in this room for many a year. Then you are not afraid ?’

‘I fear naethin’ but ill, and the prince o’ the power o’ the air, laddie !’

‘Very well, then. Get a candle, and we’ll have the skeleton out.’

Elspeth moved slowly towards the candlestick.

‘I’m no sayin’,’ she temporised, ‘that I

tak weel wi' ghaists when it comes to handlin' them.'

'It's not a ghost, I tell you. It's a skeleton, a heap of bones I discovered in the secret chamber in the wainscot. I want to move it.'

'And what's a skeleton but a ghaist wi' the scaffoldin' still roond him, laddie? It's deil's wark you're at, shiftin' the deid. An' who laid a corp in a place unknown till this vera nicht? No, no, I'll do naethin' wi' 't.'

'Oh, yes, you will, Elspeth. Some one probably hid in the chamber during the war, and was forgotten. Come away now; it's to save your master I'm asking you.'

'That's a gey fine hearin', laddie, when Robert Gordon's been confined the day. Hoots, toots! to save him!'

‘It’s true,’ said Alec. ‘He’s not dead,—Gordon. He has only been in a swoon. Sybil’s with him, and we must have him in hiding to-night before folk know he is alive.’

Elspeth stood rooted to the ground in astonishment.

‘No deid? An’ I srooded him wi’ my ain hands?’

‘No, no; he’s not dead, I tell you. Haste you, Elspeth;—we must be hiding him.’

The old woman was shaking with excitement.

‘What’s that you’re sayin’? No deid, an’ he maun be hid—my braw lad?’

‘Yes. Now, Elspeth, if you won’t help me I’ll have to call Sybil, for we must have the chamber ready just now——’

He stopped, for Elspeth had come forward with a fierce light in her eyes.

‘I hae servit Robert Gordon sax an’ forty year, an’ I’m no to fail him the noo,’ she said, proudly. ‘Gang your ain gait, laddie. Ghaist or no, I’ll win in wi’ you.’ She held the candle, and with steady hand shaded the flame when Alec touched the spring, and the door swung back. ‘Mercy me, the death smell!’ she gasped, as the room was filled with malodorous air.

She and Alec fell back awhile, and then the two advanced into the dim chamber. It was only a few feet wide, and ran along the wall into which it had been built. The flickering candlelight showed that it was empty, save for an object crouching in a corner.

Alec stepped across the room and raised

it in his arms, and Elspeth closed her eyes and muttered a prayer as he bore it past her, and deposited it on the carpet in the outer room. She followed him and gazed with horror at the piteous thing lying ghastly in the lamplight; and then the candle fell from her hand and she sank on her knees beside the skeleton.

‘God hae mercy on us!’ she groaned, swaying backwards and forwards, ‘the guid Lord hae mercy! Laddie, laddie, it’s Robert Gordon’s wife—the bonnie leddie that won awa!’

Alec was moving busily about the room, but at the words he turned and gazed pitifully down at the old woman. Tears were falling down Elspeth’s cheek on to the skeleton, where they lay glittering on the white skull. The bones were bare of flesh, but stained and faded draperies

shrouded them, while on the naked arms and neck rubies flashed like derisive laughter.

‘It’s his wife,’ Elspeth moaned. ‘Eh, dearie, dearie, that I suld see siccan an awfu’ sicht. An’ I aye kenned she wasna fause tae her mon an’ her bairn. I mind weel o’ the stanes on her bonnie neck and round airms the nicht she won awa. The stanes are glintin’ still, but the braw bosom——Guid save’s that deid stane suld last langer than livin’ flesh an’ bluid.’

Alec made no answer: his brows were knit in rapid development of a plan that had suggested itself to him. It was impossible to hide Gordon in the place that had been a living tomb for his wife, but why not, he thought, let him be screened behind the dead? Why let it be known that he was living at all? The funeral

might take place to-morrow as arranged; only, instead of Gordon, his wife's remains might be interred. Gordon could then remain at Belhaven without risk until he was well enough to leave the country.

‘I suppose there's no doubt that we have found Sybil's mother?’ he said at last.

‘There isna ony doot whatever, wae's me!’ Elspeth moaned. ‘See the bit locket wi' the images o' Robert Gordon an' the wean!’

Alec bent down and unclasped the tarnished locket which, opening, revealed a miniature of Gordon smiling at the baby Sybil.

The pathos of the thing touched him vividly; the young husband and the child smiling, smiling on the neck of wife and

mother through the terrible work of death and corruption.

But what would he have felt had he suspected that just in that manner Gordon had lived and smiled, knowing that within a few yards of him the body of his wife was decaying in the death which his jealous anger had allowed her to meet?

Alec stepped to the couch, and lifting the sofa blanket laid it tenderly over the pitiful figure.

He unfolded his scheme to Elspeth, who was willing to do anything for Gordon's safety; and in a short time his plans were matured, and he could go away to the harder task of persuading Sybil to connive at the deception he meditated.

After all, his task was not so difficult, for she was numb with fear for her father,

and the additional shock of the discovery Alec had made overthrew her composure, and left her unable to resist any proposal he made.

Yet she would never have consented to the funeral had not the remains of her mother necessitated the form of burial. As it was, she bade him do what he liked, so that Johnson should not drag her father before the law.

That night when all was quiet, and Sybil watched beside her father, almost as weak and exhausted as he after his grim struggle with death, Alec and Elspeth laid what remained of the young wife, decently shrouded, in the coffin prepared for her husband.

Alec filled it with quicklime to give weight, and himself screwed it down.

And the following day, Sybil, through

hot tears of shame and sorrow, watched the long procession wind along the drive on its way to the kirkyard at Dunbar.

Stirred as she was to remorse, now that it was too late to undo the deception she had practised, it comforted her to know that God's Acre was opening its gates to the tardy dead who had at last reached its peaceful shade.

Beside the open grave, people were whispering that Robert Gordon had been a better friend to the town than to himself. In the far distance the sea moaned around the rocks; and as he heard it Alec saw for the first time the wrong at which he was conniving.

It made him sick to hear the whispers over the dead, and he walked from the churchyard with a set white face. The secret he had to keep weighted his heart.

He knew himself to be a liar and a deceiver among the crowd, not one of whom suspected that it was not Robert Gordon they were laying in the earth.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRET OF THE TOWERS.

‘What dar’st thou yet for his sake
Who each for other did God’s own future imperil?’

IT is harder to face the thought of decay than the thought of death ; and it is more painful to see gradual moral corruption than actual transgression.

In shielding her father from the consequences of his sin, Sybil had not calculated what the act would cost herself.

Her first impulse had been to ensure

his safety. To gain this she had been willing to yield everything, to glose over crime, to deceive her friends; and the momentary deceit had wound about her a tangle of falsehood from which she could not extricate herself.

In the days following her mother's funeral, she began to realise the responsibility of the lie.

Sternly just as she was, she had to connive at trickery to shield a criminal; honest, she had to be dishonest; truthful, she had to live a falsehood.

It was difficult enough in the home life to avoid actual lying; but that was easy in comparison with the evasions she had to resort to when her friends came in to condole with her. She would have fled from the house, but her father was still too weak to be removed, and

she dare not court enquiry by refusing to see anyone.

So she sat through each interview pale, stern, silent; and everybody said how trouble had changed Sybil Gordon, and how cold she was. She seemed to have no feeling either for her father's disgrace or his death; and even her own poverty did not move her. Of course it was true that she was quite penniless, for the servants had all been dismissed the day of the funeral, and she could not even afford to buy mourning. Well, it was a thousand pities for the girl to be so callous and proud in her downfall.

Poor Sybil! whose heart was lacerated through and through, whose trouble was too deep for tears!

She had told Bessie Haldane that Gordon lived; and after the first great outburst of

joy, Bessie had relapsed into her old indifferent manner. She had not yet seen Gordon, but Sybil had promised to arrange a meeting before he left Belhaven.

Alec had haunted the place, but Sybil was bent on avoiding him. She could not forget that she had involved him in treachery to truth, and it shamed her to know that for her sake he had sinned against his sense of right.

Her high morality revolted against the false position in which she had placed him, as well as against the daily dissembling; and she chafed in the coil she had wound round them both.

Yet they could not rid themselves of it but by giving up Gordon to justice. And both knew this to be impossible. So Sybil took up her burden of unfaithfulness and bore it with a noble shame that was as

dignified as truth itself. On one point she was determined. She would never allow Alec to involve himself further in the dishonour of the family. She had weakly listened to him when the shame would have been buried with her father, but now she would never chain him to the living death of an alliance with her.

Love was not to be hers ; but she might find peace by-and-by in performing her duty to her unhappy father. She would devote the rest of her life to him, and in some foreign town she would tend his declining years, and fill her hungry heart with the sweet services of a daughter's love.

While she was forecasting her future, the two Miss Dixons were announced, and she rose to receive them.

The old ladies were in black from stock-

ing to mitten ; and about them was an air of resignation delicately suggestive of rue and rosemary. Each took one of Sybil's hands and drew her on to the sofa between them ; Miss Prissie surreptitiously inserting a mint lozenge into the fingers she had captured, Miss Prue pressing tearful kisses on those she held prisoner.

‘My dear child, how pale you look!’ said Miss Prissie. ‘I must send you in some herb beer.’

‘Dear Sybil, mournings make you so interesting,’ murmured Miss Prue.

They both inspected her after this ; and Miss Prissie shook her head disapprovingly when she saw that Sybil was wearing a black cashmere that had seen service the previous winter.

‘Dearie, dearie,’ she murmured, ‘it’s not proper respect. You should be wearing

new mournings, Sybil, and the first gowns should be heavy crape. The sods are not yet settled on him, and you should not be in that old cashmere.'

Sybil checked a hysterical inclination to laugh.

'Have you seen Mr. Ladislav lately?' she asked, to divert the talk from the painful subject.

'Yes, he is not keeping well. Dr. Rutherford says it's blood poisoning. I saw him in the church this morning. You haven't been there since the funeral, dearie? No, no, sister and I thought very likely not; so I took a broom and made the grave tidy, while sister laid on the flowers she had brought. We had a great respect for your late father.' Miss Prissie sniffed, and Miss Prue gently dabbed her eyes with a lavender-scented handkerchief.

‘And I thought,’ Miss Prissie continued, ‘you would like to know, dearie, that neither of us believe a word of the—the matters connected with business at the bank. It is libellous to mention such a thing in connection with any one of our friends, especially the dead that cannot justify himself—and so I told that Johnson! He notified your wish to restore the bonds that have been mislaid; but I told him at our age we couldn’t pretend to be bothered with business;—and so, Sybil, he is just to invest whatever we have in the bank in your name.’

Miss Prissie pressed another lozenge into Sybil’s hand so forcefully that it broke the one already there with a little crack that caused her to sit very straight and look guiltless of offering kindnesses.

‘Miss Prissie,’ Sybil said, softly, ‘I can’t

take it. You must really not ask me.'

'Oh, do now, my dear,' said Miss Prissie, coaxing; 'they are so good for flatulence, and are warm and soothing inside. You can't get very low if you suck one now and then.'

Sybil gulped down mingled tears and laughter.

'I meant the bonds—the money!' she said, choking.

Miss Prissie was apparently oblivious.

'Your late dear father,' she said, thoughtfully, 'never refused one—at any time. I used to pass him two every Sunday in kirk as soon as Mr. Ladislaw got to secondly. It stopped him from falling off. Ah, poor dear! he was such a man for a nap during sermon; but there'll be no fear of his sleeping in church now; he is sleeping in the churchyard.'

‘Miss Prissie,’ said Sybil, rising suddenly, unable longer to control herself, ‘you must let me get you some tea, you know Elspeth is my only maid now, so you will excuse me—won’t you?’

‘Surely, dearie, but we came to tell you—Mr. Ladislaw asked us—he has named you in his will, so you needn’t fret about money, dearie . . .’

The old lady stared in astonishment, for with a burst of strange laughter Sybil rushed from the room.

Miss Prissie turned sadly to Miss Prue.

‘Ah, dearie, dearie! Sorrow should strengthen our souls, but I’m doubting it’s only hardened her heart, puir laummie! Did you see, sister? not an inch of crape on her gown, though there’s two yards double width on mine, and the same on yours. Ah, dearie, dearie! if I’m not

spared to wear crape for myself, I doubt none of these young things will do it for me.'

'But her face, sister,' said Miss Prue, timidly, smoothing down her silk folds. 'Did you see her face? It looked like a white rose drowned in rain. I can't think she is hard. I should be afraid she will break down.'

'I am doubting a good strong dose of salts would be the best thing for her,' said Miss Prissie, ignoring the sentiment of Miss Prue's simile.

Meanwhile, Elspeth was sitting beside Gordon's bed, and he was painting in lurid colours the horror of the slow hours in which he had waited for the death that would not come. Elspeth listened in silence, only the click of her knitting needles interrupting the story.

Gordon was feverish and excited, but the excitement only coloured his cheeks and brightened his eyes till he looked young again.

His experience had sobered him at first ; but with returning strength his carelessness was again asserting itself, and it seemed only too probable that his future would be as barren of good and worthless as his past.

Even now he found a dramatic interest in the sensational experience through which he had come ; and, looking back from the point of safety, he took a curious pleasure in recalling the horrors of his living death.

He knew of the discovery of his wife's remains, but he said nothing that would implicate himself in her death ; and the four who alone knew the secret had

no suspicion of his share in the tragedy.

He had been told that he was believed to be dead, that his wife had been buried in the grave dug for him, and that he was in hiding in an unused room at the Towers, and the knowledge gave zest to his novel position.

He had not the remotest idea of surrendering himself to justice; he had meditated it once in the first flush of gratitude at his escape, but his return to health had changed all that. His sins seemed to be of the imperishable nature of asbestos. They glowed and shrivelled in the fires of contrition, and yet were not consumed.

‘It was just awful,’ he concluded. ‘To lie there and hear everything,—to know that you were being laid out for dead,—to struggle and struggle trying to make

yourself heard,—to know it was all in vain, that you had to remain still and go through with the whole bad business! . . . The day they put me in the coffin I thought I should have died with the fright I got.’

‘An’ did you no lose yoursel’ ava?’

‘Once only, for I could hear nothing;—everything round me was silence, and then I dreamt I was in hell.’

‘Ou ay,’ said Elspeth, looking calmly at him over the rim of her glasses; ‘weel it nicht hae been waur.’

Gordon raised himself on his elbow and stared at her.

‘It nicht hae been waur? Woman alive! how could it have been worse?’

‘It nicht hae been true,’ said Elspeth, grimly, as she turned the heel of her stocking.

Gordon laughed, and sank back on his pillow.

‘I tell you what, Elspeth ; although I can laugh now, it was no laughing matter to me then. God ! what a hell it was ! I’d have done anything to have had the power to kill myself. But it’s taught me a lesson—and I’ll never commit suicide again.’

‘Shooicide !’ Elspeth caught at the word ;—‘an’ wad you be after tellin’ me, Robert Gordon, that you died by your ain hand ?’

Before Gordon could reply, there was a tap at the door, and Bessie Haldane looked in.

‘The Miss Dixons are here, Elspeth, and Sandy is in the room below looking for mice behind the wainscot.’

Elspeth rose hurriedly.

‘Guid save’s! but I maun stap him at once. Gae you in beside Robert Gordon till I win back, lassie. I’ll no be a meenute.’

She bustled out, and Bessie stood outside hesitating till Gordon’s ‘Let me see you once more, Bessie,’ drew her within the door.

She was shy and drooping, yet her happiness was plainly to be seen; and, when Gordon held out his hand to her, she crossed the room and laid her soft little palm in it, blushing eloquently. Her eyes fell before his eager gaze and her hand trembled in his.

‘Bessie!’ he said, ‘Bessie!’

No more; but his tones sent wild thrills of joy through her. Gordon hesitated. Ought he to speak? Had he any right to let her know he had been conscious of her

kisses and the words of love spoken, as she thought, to the dead? And yet he loved her, and he needed her love. He had come back from the grave so conscious of his own degradation that Sybil's patient love angered more than it pleased him.

Her silent justice, her stern purity, her supreme self-surrender were mute reproaches that made him uncomfortably conscious of his fall. He was more at ease with Bessie; her love-filled eyes told him that, whatever he might be, he was her beloved and——

He was utterly selfish.

He held her hand, gazing into her face till her startled eyes sought his . . . Then their lips met in a passionate kiss, from which Bessie started back with flaming cheeks.

He smiled winningly, whispering,

‘You love me, Bessie?’

‘Yes,’ she murmured.

He gave a low contented laugh.

‘That’s my little girl! And by-and-by we’ll get away to America, and you’ll be my little wife, eh?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered again, while a sudden fear of treachery to Sybil shot through her.

But she forgot it when he drew her lips to his once more.

‘You don’t mind marrying a man whose fortune has been bad luck from beginning to end, eh?’ he said, after a time. ‘You don’t think because Johnson found out before I had time to put them back that the bonds were not there that I am a thief, eh?’

‘I knew you were not,’ she said, proudly.

‘Well, Bessie, the luck has turned at last. A fortnight ago I was a ruined man. To-day Macdonald tells me I have made my fortune by a lucky rise in Mexican rails? I can pay Miss Dixon, and still keep a pretty little sum for the two of us.’

‘It should go to Sybil,’ she said, quickly. ‘I have my own fortune. It will keep us both when we are married.’

‘I thought you didn’t believe in marriage!’

‘So I don’t!’ she said, saucily. ‘But if I marry you it will be like marrying a ghost, so I don’t mind.’

He pinched her ear as he had been used to pinch Sybil’s.

‘We will start next month!’

In the parlour Alec was telling Sybil that Gordon must fly the next day. A

rumour was afloat that he had not been buried, and Johnson had obtained an order to have the coffin opened !

CHAPTER XIII.

A GRIM COMEDY.

‘ But no word comes from the dead.’

THE sun had set some time, and the western end of the church had lost its reflected glory, as Johnson—his shoulders up to his ears, his eyes bent apologetically on the ground—shuffled towards the corner of the churchyard where Gordon’s grave had been dug.

Old Jarvis the sexton was with him,

bobbing his head and mumbling that he 'doubted there was something wrong with that buryin'—the coffin was ower licht, though to be sure Gordon was but a slight man for his size.

Johnson listened, rubbing his hands nervously.

He had assured himself that Gordon was dead, but the spreading rumour—how it arose nobody knew—that the banker had not been buried, had so worked on his fears that he could not rest till he was satisfied that he was safely underground beyond the reach of the law.

He had heard from Alec of the sudden rise in stocks by which it would be easy for Sybil to make good Miss Dixon's loss, and this had not improved his temper. Moreover, he had discovered that a snuff-box, purchased the day before as having

belonged to Oliver Cromwell, had really been manufactured by an artist in Edinburgh; and his soul was wroth within him.

He quickened his steps, peevishly urging Jarvis on.

‘The night will be coming down before we have got the business through,’ he said, ‘and I’m not so fond of seeing men in their shrouds. Come away, man, hurry!’

‘A’i’ guid time,’ said Jarvis, stolidly. ‘A mon hasna ony ca’ tae hasten tae the kirk-yard. He’ll get theer sune eneuch wiout a puckle hurry. Wha’s tae witness the exshoomin, mannie?’

‘Dr. Rutherford. He was to be at the kirk.’

‘An’ far’s the order for gettin’ the corp?’

‘At the bank, just. You’ll do well enough without it.’

Jarvis planted his spade in the ground.

‘I maun see’t or I’ll no shift a sod, master.’

‘Toots! The order’s all right. Go you on while I get it.’

Jarvis leaned on his spade and looked at Johnson with little twinkling eyes.

‘If the doctor laddie’s to be theer, I winna shift ane sod till I see the lines. Hoo suld I ken you’re no fra Edinburgh Infirmary seekin’ a body? Na, na, bring me the lines an’ I’ll hae him oop, but no while I see them.’

Johnson looked round. Rutherford was nowhere visible. The bank was just across the road, there would be time to get the order and exhume the body before dusk.

He hurried away, Jarvis throwing after him an ironical, 'Haste ye back.'

When he returned, the old man was sitting on a stone pensively munching the end of a stick.

He dismounted at leisure and looked at the order. This was the merest form with him, for he was not able to read.

'I hae to be pertikler,' he explained, after a lengthy perusal of the paper which he read upside down. 'A muckle years syne when my feyther was sexton the resurrection laddies cam a' about the country. I' thae days theer was a bit roadie through the graves to Spott, an' mony a nicht they cam in by, an' lifted the newly-buried. Ae nicht—an awfu' nicht it were wi' the sea roaring, an' the wind srieking roond the yaird like souls i' torment,—it wis o' the

clap o' twa i' the mornin',—theer cam
fower douce-like callants intil the yaird.
Hoo they kenned it I canna tell, but a
bonnie lass had been laid there a day, or
mebbe mair, an' they got her oop and
openit the coffin. Theer she lay blue an'
cauld, wi' her e'e peepin', an' the srood
wettit wi'——'

Johnson had curled like a withered leaf,
and his pale lips were twitching.

'I'll just take a look down the road till
I see if the doctor's coming,' he said, shuf-
fling off out of earshot.

Rutherford was not in sight, and the
shadows crept cheerlessly about the shrun-
ken figure watching at the gate. At last,
when it seemed likely that they would have
to give up the attempt that night, Ruther-
ford appeared.

‘I couldn’t come before,’ he explained. ‘I was called in to see a patient—Mr. Ladislav—he is very bad. What’s the meaning of this fool’s errand?’

‘The folk are saying Gordon wasn’t buried,’ Johnson said, rubbing his hands apologetically.

‘Stuff and nonsense! That’s only because the coffin was closed the night before the funeral. If you listen to all folk say——’

‘And the coffin was lighter than it should have been.’

‘Well! and if it had been heavier than it should been they would have gossiped. I have no patience! Go on now, and let us get it over.’

The doctor spoke irritably. He had had no dinner, and was in no mood for useless

investigations. Also he had his own worries, for since his interview with Sybil, he had begun to find out that his love was deeper-rooted than he had thought. He could not forget the weary sadness with which she had dismissed him; her loneliness appealed to his manhood, and he was struggling now between his love of money and the love he now knew that he had for her.

Jarvis had seen him coming, and by the time the two reached the grave he was hard at work.

There was need to hurry, for the night was closing in stormily, and a rack of clouds moving in from the sea threatened rain.

‘Guid save’s, but it’s gettin’ awfu’ dark!’ said Jarvis.

‘Have you to go down far?’ Rutherford asked, with an impatient glance at the darkening sky.

‘Na, na, the grave was fu’ before he wis putten in. Three feet or so just.’

After that there was silence till large drops of rain began to fall.

‘We’ll just leave this business for to-night,’ said the doctor. ‘I have no fancy for getting wet.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Johnson, eagerly, ‘tomorrow, first thing.’

‘I’m upon him the noo,’ said Jarvis from below; and at that moment the pick struck the coffin with a hollow thud. Simultaneously a flash of lightning followed by deafening thunder showed that the blow had splintered the lid and made a gaping rent in the wood.

‘Let’s be going!’ Johnson said, shrinking nervously.

‘Might as well stop,’ said Rutherford, crossly, ‘it will be done with in a minute.’

‘I hae putten a holic through the lid,’ said Jarvis, looking up. ‘Gin you’s e needin’ to ken ’at Gordon’s below, you micht see eneuch wi’oot takin’ him above groond.’

‘Is he there?’ Johnson said, shuffling forward.

Rutherford folded his arms, and refused to interest himself in the question.

‘Ou ay,’ said Jarvis, taking the twig from his mouth to clear away the lime that hid the contents of the coffin. ‘Ou ay; an’ quicklime a’ roond him. The flesh is aff the banes a’ready. I can see his han’ an’ it’s bare. Losh! but that’s quick

wark. Forty an' fower year has it ta'en to build oop Robert Gordon, an' i' less than sae mony days the worrums hae taken him doon! Wull I lift the lid for you tae see, doctor, or wull you juist preen intil 't? A sudden downpour of rain made him cower in the grave, and not hearing Rutherford's reply, he added, 'I'm dootin' if I heave it oop you'll feel the smell some.'

'No, no,' Johnson cried; 'stand away and let me look.' He stooped over the grave, and nearly fell in as another flash of lightning showed the gaping lid, and the bones of a skeleton hand lying within. 'He's there for certain,' he cried, starting back with a livid face. 'But it's quick work to lose the flesh so soon. It must have been the lime they put in the coffin.'

Rutherford's lips curled cynically at this unscientific explanation ; but he was in no mood to go into the effects of quicklime, or to cast the pearls of sulphuretted and phosphoretted hydrogen before an animal like Johnson ; so he merely said, in reply,

‘ I suppose you are satisfied now ; and, as I am wet through, I'll go.’

Before Johnson could protest, he had gone.

The inspector looked wistfully after his retreating figure.

‘ I'll not stay longer,’ he said to Jarvis ; ‘ this rain is awful, and I'm subject to rheumatism. You can be filling in the grave. There's sixpence for your trouble.’

‘ Some folks' room is better than their shoshiety,’ said Jarvis, crossly, issuing from the grave and proceeding to shovel

in the soil. ‘A puckle fulishness liftin’ a
deid mon to see gin he’s i’ his coffin!—and
saxpence for ’t!’

CHAPTER XIV.

GOOD NIGHT.

‘ All her gain
Is but the pang of unpermitted prayer.’

THE two Miss Dixons in a limp and dejected attitude were waiting in the manse parlour for the doctor’s verdict on Mr. Ladislaw’s condition.

It was late ; but their anxiety was too great to allow them to leave the manse until they had heard the last report ; for it was well known that Mr. Ladislaw was dangerously ill.

Rutherford's report was however encouraging, and the old ladies were able to spare some interest for the gossip they had heard that night.

'What is the story about the body of Sybil's late dear father having been exhumed and taken back to Belhaven?' asked Miss Prissie.

'An exaggeration,' Rutherford said, shortly. 'I was present two hours ago, and know how much truth there is in the gossip.'

'Then the grave was not opened after all?'

There was a shade of disappointment in Miss Prissie's tones that the sensational incident might be altogether false.

'Yes, it was opened. It seems Miss Gordon had had the coffin closed the night before the funeral, so the undertaker's

man did not do it as usual, and folk talked—as they will whether they have anything to say or not. That ass Johnson went to the grave this evening, and did not come away till he had seen Gordon lying there. Now they're convinced of his death, I suppose they will let him lie in peace.'

'How shocking!' Miss Prissie shivered. 'I trust it will not get to dear Sybil's ears.'

'Ah, well, I daresay it will. I met Alec Macdonald just now, and I fancy he was going out to tell her.'

'I wonder if Jarvis remembered to replace the wreaths,' sighed Miss Prue. 'Poor dear Sybil! But I suppose she will not remain long at Belhaven if you have your way, doctor?'

Rutherford reddened under her mean-

ing eyes, but he shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

‘I? oh, I’ve nothing to do with it. Miss Gordon will please herself. It’s nothing to me, I assure you.’

‘What! are you not to be married?’ Miss Prue asked, blankly.

‘Indeed I am not, Miss Dixon!’

The doctor carried off his discomfort by a pleasant smile. Miss Prue’s eyes moistened. She remembered the Sunday when Sybil had all but told her she loved Dr. Rutherford, and her heart ached for the girl.

‘But I’m thinking that she cared for you,’ she said timidly, conscious that she desecrated Sybil’s love by speaking of it.

Rutherford smiled suavely.

‘You wouldn’t blame me for that, ma’am?’

‘No,’ Miss Prissie blurted out, severely. ‘But I blame you for being the daftest lad that ever wore breeks. However!—Don’t sniff so, sister. I hope you are not crying for dear Sybil, who will have more lovers than any girl in the county before the year’s out. A sweet young thing like Sybil, with all her money, won’t need to look at country doctors, I can tell you!’

She glanced viciously at the doctor, whose face was crimson.

‘Gordon lost all his money, she hasn’t a sou,’ he said.

‘Hasn’t she indeed?’ mocked Miss Prissie, shaking her curls. ‘Hasn’t she? Young Macdonald has been here to-day telling me she has fifteen hundred a-year;

and I know she is heir to at least three thousand ! Come, sister.'

With a look like a whole army of exclamation points, the old lady gathered her skirts together and went mincing from the manse, leaving Rutherford to a very bad quarter-of-an-hour.

He had not only lost a rich wife, but the woman he loved as much as it was possible for him to love anything. For the next fortnight he worked incessantly, giving himself no time to think of his sordid folly, and at last his own affairs were entirely eclipsed by the rapid disease that was hurrying the minister to the grave.

Bravely setting aside conventions, the Miss Dixons had installed themselves as nurses ; and when she was not

fussing about the invalid Miss Prissie sat with red eyes, and hands folded in the resigned manner that had once been Miss Prue's monopoly.

And then one day, in answer to the minister's repeated request, they sent to tell Sybil that he was dying and wished to see her.

Miss Prissie met the girl at the door.

‘Oh, Miss Prissie!’ Sybil cried. ‘I had no idea he was so ill. What is it?’

‘I don't know, dearie. Dr. Rutherford has a Latin name for it, but I think it's a broken heart just. He has never looked up since your late dear father died.’

Sybil lost the colour her walk had brought into her cheek.

‘Miss Prue,—is she here?’ she asked.

‘Sister is in the other room. She is weeping so for him she can’t do anything to help. But tears are a poor substitute for beef tea, I tell her.’

‘Miss Prissie, you look very tired. Let me take your place while you rest,’ Sybil faltered, with a strong desire to be of use to the man who had loved her father.

‘Well, well, dearie, I would ; only you’re but a young thing, and he’s not to say an old man ; and I doubt you couldn’t manage the broth by yourself. No, no, I’ll just go on. He won’t need us—not to say long.’

Miss Prissie dashed her mitten across her eyes, and then looked up brightly.

‘He’ll like fine to see you, Sybil. He has asked for you all day. Come away, dearie.’

Sybil went softly into the room after her, and a smile trembled over the minister's face as she took his hand.

‘Miss Sybil! I thought you would come. But it is almost too dark for me to see your face. What time is it?’

‘It is just six,’ she said, gently.

‘Ah yes, ah yes,—atween the lights. Miss Sybil, it is so with me now.’

He gave her a grave tender look, and she bent and kissed his hand.

A delicate colour flushed over his face, but a fine reticence kept him silent.

‘I want to do something for you,’ she cried, impulsively. ‘Mr. Ladislav, is there nothing I can do for you?’

‘Your young face brightens the dark, Miss Sybil. I think that is why I wanted you here,—or perhaps because it is a promise of the morning to close the eyes on

youth and life. It is a memory to take with us, like a candle into a dark room.'

After a while he murmured, drowsily,

' " We cannot tell how far a little candle throws its beams,"—is that how it goes?—can the light of the known illumine the darkness of the unknown? . . . '

' It's the gloaming surely, the bairns' bed-time . . . I'm wearying for my mother to kiss me good-night.'

She had died when he was born.

Miss Prissie, to whom he had once told the story of his lonely life, sobbed aloud at the words.

The hours dragged on, and the room was dark with shadow.

' If my mother kissed me I could sleep,' he murmured again, in a faint, weak voice.

Miss Prissie lighted a candle ; and Sybil, seeing the shadows about his face, stooped and kissed the lips that no woman had ever touched before her.

At her kiss he opened his eyes, and the old comical twinkle sparkled in them.

‘I shall sleep now. Good-night, Miss Sybil. But first I’ll tell you a good story,’ he began.

But he could not finish ; and what that story was no one will ever know.

‘I can do nothing if I stay,’ said Dr. Rutherford.

‘But sister would wish to see you, I am sure,’ said Miss Prue, timidly. ‘Please wait while I get her.’

She rose, her limp and dejected curls witnessing to the depth of her grief ; but

when she was safely out of the room her face brightened and an unwonted cunning came into her eyes.

‘I dinna care though sister should call me a match-maker,’ she said. ‘Young things should be happy while they may. Youth will go and death will come.’

Her lips twitched, but she had controlled her face before she reached the room where Sybil and Miss Prissie were making arrangements for the funeral.

‘Dearie, dearie,’ she cried, with overt guilefulness. ‘I’ve left my handkercher in the front parlour. Sybil, my love, your legs are younger than mine—will you——’

‘I will get it,’ Sybil said, rising wearily.

She had reached the door, when Miss Prue gave a deprecatory ‘hem’ that betrayed her to Miss Prissie ;—‘and—Sybil,

my love, if you are detained—there's no hurry——'

Sybil smiled unsuspectingly ; and, as soon as she was out of the room, Miss Prissie turned with a sharp ejaculation.

'Sister !'

'Yes, sister ?' said Miss Prue, meekly subsiding.

'Who is in there ?'

'Dr. Rutherford, sister !'

'Well, matches are made in heaven,' sighed Miss Prissie, shifting the blame as far as her orthodoxy allowed.

After a few moments she rose decidedly.

'I will not allow that young lad to take her out of hand ; and the puir lammie not knowing how he's been playing with her. Come, sister, it's your blame—you'll just go in with me while I tell Sybil.'

Miss Prissie marched down the passage,

Miss Prue dejectedly following. When they reached the parlour door, they saw it was ajar, and both stood petrified by what they heard.

‘Then you refuse to listen to me?’

‘Yes. If I had ever had any love for you, Dr. Rutherford, your conduct would have cured me of it. As it is—you have never been, and never will be anything to me!’

Was that Sybil speaking in that hard, ringing voice?

Miss Prue’s knees shook beneath her; but Miss Prissie pushed open the door with a gratified cough.

At the sound, Sybil and Rutherford turned and saw the two, and the doctor’s face became scarlet with anger.

They had heard him declare he had no intention of marrying the girl;—they

would not fail to attribute his sudden change of purpose to mercenary motives.

He bit his lips as he thought how the story, rendered piquant by Miss Prissie's malice and Miss Prue's sentiment, would be in every mouth ; while he, the popular doctor, would be exposed to derision and scorn till he retrieved his position by some brilliant—and at present improbable—coup.

‘ My dear Sybil, I fear we intrude,’ said Miss Prissie, firmly.

‘ No, no. Do come in, dear Miss Prissie, I am so glad you have come.’

The unequivocal relief in the girl's tone was extremely unflattering to Rutherford, who took up his hat and got out of the room as well as he could.

He had scarcely gone when Alec called,

and joined his entreaties to Miss Dixon's that Sybil should stay the night at their house instead of returning to the Towers.

He promised to go down to Belhaven to tell Elspeth of her safety ; and as Gordon was now convalescent, and needed little attention, Sybil was glad to escape the long walk after the excitement and grief she had come through that day.

Alec's call at the manse was shortened by the arrival of the deacons and various church officials to whom the sudden death of the minister had been communicated ; and he was obliged to leave without having the interview with Sybil for which he longed.

So Sybil stayed in Dunbar that night, and early the following morning she had a visit from Mrs. Haldane.

‘Do you know where Bessie is?’ was her first question, as she grimly confronted Sybil.

‘No,’ said Sybil, ‘I saw her at Belhaven yesterday, and she walked in with me to Dunbar. I have heard nothing of her since.’

‘I can’t understand it,’ said Mrs. Haldane, anxiety and gratification whimsically blended on her face. ‘She has gone away, and left me a note that explains nothing. “Going to pursue a line of her own,” she says. Did she mention nothing to you, Sybil?’

‘No,’ Sybil said again. ‘I have not had a talk with her since daddy——’

‘Ah, yes!’ interrupted Mrs. Haldane. ‘His death was a great shock to her. She has been very strange ever since; hysterical, I should say, if it was possible for

a girl of mine to give way to nerves. I sometimes surprised her in tears, and then she would be in the highest spirits. And lately she has been very secret.'

'What does her note say?' Sybil asked, hoarsely.

She was unaware of Bessie's interview with Gordon, and now blamed herself for having been unsympathetic with her friend's hopeless love. She had told her of Gordon's escape from death, not believing it possible that Bessie would still care for a man who had proved himself so unworthy of trust; and she had promised that she should see him once before he left Scotland;—but the time had not come for the interview, and now Bessie had gone.

'She doesn't say much,—only that the time has come for her to choose her own

way, and she has chosen it,' Mrs. Haldane answered. 'There was a time,' she continued, reflectively, 'when such an action would have commended itself to me. But it is one thing, Sybil, to advocate the Bloomer dress, and it is another thing to see your daughter in it.'

Mrs. Haldane's philosophy collapsed, and her face began to quiver.

'It is not that I object to emancipation,' she continued, fatuously. 'I admire it in the abstract, I used to preach it—but I never expected to have a child to practise it! You see, Sybil, I can't get away from my responsibility, for there's no doubt Bessie's tendency is hereditary.'

Sybil put her hand kindly on Mrs. Haldane's shaking fingers.

'You are a good girl, Sybil; keep so, child. It doesn't matter what you say,

it doesn't matter what you preach, the thing that you are will meet you some day and drag you out of your pretences. If I had been true to my own convictions, instead of pandering to conventionalities all these years, I should have been proud of Bessie to-day.'

She took out her handkerchief and wiped away two reluctant tears.

'Well, I must go. Don't blame Bessie, child; it's human nature. But human nature is only transmitted impulse, so you see we all have it to answer for.'

Mrs. Haldane's dejection extended even to her bonnet-strings—she explained afterwards she had been caught in a storm—and it touched the hearts of the two Miss Dixons.

Miss Prissie insisted that she should take a glass of her elderberry wine—

a decoction that deepened the lady's gloom!—and Miss Prue offered what consolation was to be found in a verse by L. E. L.

CHAPTER XV.

RENUNCIATION.

‘Gaze onward without claim to hope :
Nor, gazing backward, court regret.’

THAT evening, Sybil left Miss Dixon, and took her way home along the cliffs to Belhaven. Her face was sorrowful ; for Mr. Ladislaw’s death and Bessie’s disappearance had grieved her sorely, and added to the weight of trouble she had carried since the day of her father’s first seizure. Only a few months before, she had walked with

.

Bessie on those cliffs watching the blue waters, and white-sailed boats, and foam-fringed waves among the rocks; and now, how different was the aspect of everything before her!

The sea stretched grey and still, shrouded in mist. The islands were hidden; no flashing sunlight glorified the waters. The waves moaned at her feet, and a rumble of thunder threatened a storm.

Nature reflected the colourless sadness of her lot, and she thought wistfully of the vanished summer-time. For eighteen years she had idolised her father; he had been the world to her—a solitary heroic figure filling the canvas of her life.

And then her eyes had been opened to see him in his true proportions,—with all the flaws and faults of his character in strong light.

But she had loved him still ; for a woman does not cease to love when a man falls below her ideal. He must sink below the universal ideal of manhood before her love will die. And at first Gordon had not altogether done this. In a broad sense he had been manly, with spasms of nobleness that went far to redeem his incapacity for sustained virtue.

Then she thought she had lost him ; and death had raised him once more to the heroic level. Afterwards for the first time she had seen him,—weak, fallen, unworthy. She had almost rejoiced at his death, for her sorrow had been tempered by a misery of thanksgiving that he had passed beyond the reach of his sins.

And then he had returned to life,—come back to her reluctant affection, more

careless, more sinning, more unworthy of esteem.

She had not yet learned that testing leaves a man better or worse than it finds him, never in exactly the same position.

But love dies hard, and she had still loved him—with the love of a mother for an erring child.

And this love had been thrown back in her face, for her father was at no pains to conceal the fact that her presence irritated him.

It constantly reproached him for having blighted her life. He knew that his crime stood between Sybil and love, and, having wronged, he began to hate her. He kept his plans for the future from her. She knew nothing of his interview with Bessie and its results, and was unaware that Gordon was going to marry her.

Bessie had once made a spasmodic attempt at confession, but, failing, had given it up and agreed to the concealment Gordon enjoined.

So Sybil bore the pain of disillusion alone, and little suspected how fate was plotting against her.

A fortnight had passed since Alec had alarmed her by the threatened discovery. Johnson's suspicions had been lulled to rest by his graveyard investigations, and Gordon had remained concealed at the Towers.

Alec was beginning to repent his share in concealing him. He had acted on a sudden natural impulse to spare Sybil, and to save her father from death; but the moral corruption he witnessed sickened him.

Gordon's selfishness, his insensibility to

every fine feeling,—remorse, contrition, even gratitude,—was a more shocking spectacle than would have been his death.

Alec saw that Sybil had ceased to be necessary to her father, but he could not persuade her to reverse the decision to which she had come with regard to himself. To all his pleading she had but one answer :

‘ I will never bring disgrace into your family.’

He had seen her going homeward, and had followed her this evening, and before she had got to the end of her sad thoughts he had overtaken her and drawn her arm within his own.

Poor Sybil ! she knew it was wrong to allow him to take possession of her in that manner, but her heart was sore and she

could not deny herself the comfort of his tenderness.

Stern, and strong, and proud, as she appeared, her nature was essentially feminine; and she longed for love and protection far more than many weaker natures.

‘Sybil,’ said Alec, ‘I have had a letter from Auchinblae, and I want you to read it. Or shall I read a sentence to you?’

She bent her head, and he read aloud:

“Give Sybil our dearest love, and tell her nothing would make us happier than to receive her as our daughter. We know no one whom we would prefer to be your wife.”

‘Don’t!’ she cried, piteously, withdrawing her arm. ‘I can’t bear it. Don’t tempt me, Alec. I can’t leave daddy. And, if I could, I would never let you

ruin your prospects by marrying a felon's daughter.'

'Nonsense, that is my look-out. I want your consent to-night, Sybil, for I have been offered a good post further north, and it depends on you whether I go or stay.'

'You must go! It will not be long before we leave Belhaven, so it would do no good to remain.'

'And will you promise to come to me?'

'I can't! I can't! Alec dear, don't make it harder for me.'

He looked at her determined face with angry regret that he had ever shielded Gordon. He had brought more misery on Sybil by doing so; and had spoiled his own cause only that the criminal might 'flee the time carelessly,' in a new life with Bessie Haldane.

Alec had discovered the secret communication Bessie and Gordon were carrying on, and he was furious for Sybil's sake. It was not the first time that he had wished he had allowed the law to take its course with the banker.

‘Sybil,’ he said, gravely, ‘you love your pride more than you love me. And you are deceiving yourself. Your father needs you no longer.’

She drew apart and stared at him reproachfully.

‘Alec, what do you mean? Not need me?—daddy! When I have been everything to him all these years?’

‘A daughter's love goes for nothing, sometimes,’ Alec said, sadly. ‘Has it never struck you that he may marry again?’

She gazed uncomprehendingly at him.

‘Again? When he has been faithful so long to my mother’s memory?’

‘You forget, dear. There was a mystery about his wife’s fate. She might have been alive. Now he is free to marry again.’

‘But—the disgrace! How could he be so selfish as to let anyone share the sin—the misery——’

‘Ah, Sybil, every one has not your scruples. It is strange you have not connected Bessie Haldane’s flight with your father.’

‘Alec!’ Sybil gasped.

‘Yes. Let me tell you what I have seen. I have always suspected that she was more friendly with your father than she let you know. Several times lately I have seen her walking about under his window; and last night I was coming up the drive

when I saw a white packet thrown from the window. A few minutes after I met Miss Haldane, and when she caught sight of me she hid a white parcel under her jacket. I am very sure that she has some means of communicating with your father, and that they are plotting something together.'

'I can't believe it!' Sybil interrupted, passionately. 'Bessie deceive me? And to try to take my father from me? Oh, it is too wicked! She could never do it.'

'There is nothing wicked about it really,' said Alec, gloomily. 'Legally he is free to marry, only now it is dishonourable. However, if they are planning a secret marriage, as seems likely, it will leave you free to——'

Sybil stopped him. Her face was white

with passion, yet her eyes in their despair were pitiful.

‘Alec, don’t! You can’t understand. I have loved him so, been everything to him for twenty years. He has had no one else; and now—when I have given up everything for him,—truth and honesty—and have lied and deceived until I loathe myself. When I have stooped to this, and have dragged you down too—now, now to find that I am nothing to him! And to have him cast me off, stoop to plot against me——’

She dashed her hand across her eyes, ashamed of the hot tears that blinded her, and Alec put his arm about her.

‘Dear, don’t let this pain you too much. He has never been worthy of your love. Let him go! . . . And, Sybil, you must come to me. You see how we want you.’

She drew herself away with passionate force.

‘Yes! your people want me—but why? Because they think that I am left alone,—that the disgraceful past has been buried with him. Would they want me if they knew he was alive?—if they knew we had gone through the mockery of burying him?—if they knew he was a felon hiding from the law? Could your father—so true, so just as he is—countenance such deceit in his own family?’

Alec’s face fell. That view of the case had not presented itself to him, and he knew the difficulty in the way better even than Sybil.

While he hesitated, not knowing how to meet her argument, she turned from him and ran swiftly past the rocks towards Belhaven.

He did not attempt to follow, and walked back to Dunbar in extreme dejection.

Was there any hope of untangling this knotted skein?

CHAPTER XVI.

VALE.

‘ The past is in its grave,
Tho’ its ghost haunts us.’

It was well that Alec had prepared Sybil for what awaited her. Elspeth met her at the door saying that her father had been asking for her, and a glance at the old woman’s face told the girl that some new trouble was in store. Her heart was bleeding with the passionate anguish of her farewell to Alec, and in sudden hunger

for human sympathy she threw her arms round Elspeth.

‘ Oh, nursie, nursie, I have you ! *You* love me ! *You* will not forsake your bairn ? ’

The old nurse caressed the dark head pressed to her bosom, but made no reply ; and Sybil looking up saw in her eyes a hard glitter that somehow seemed to give an affirmative to her question.

The knowledge, hypothetical though it was, that they were all in league against her, stung her into proud silence. She withdrew her arms, and walked with steady feet to the room where Gordon was sitting, Elspeth following her.

Sandy Millar was in the room, and Sybil gave a little cry of alarm when she saw him ; for he had not been let into the secret of the Towers.

‘It is all right,’ said Gordon, ‘Sandy can be trusted. I sent for him, as I shall need his help in getting away.’

The words staggered Sybil. Her father had not spoken to her of his departure, and they showed that he was independent of her, and could make his plans without even consulting her convenience.

‘Going away?’ she faltered. ‘Soon?’

She caught the back of a chair and braced herself for what was to come next.

Gordon glanced uneasily at her, and played nervously with a paper-knife he held in his hand.

‘I am tired of being a prisoner in one room,’ he said, pettishly. ‘And I am quite strong again. I want to be free. If I could get away, I should be myself. I have arranged everything. Sandy here

will drive me to Berwick ; and I will get on to Liverpool from there. I am going to America. I think you know that ?’

He glanced furtively at her as he asked the question.

‘ Yes,’ she said, trying to smile. ‘ When do you wish to start ? I can be ready as soon as you like.’

He hesitated.

‘ Well, the fact is, Sybil, it is better that you should not go with me. It would—it would—attract notice,—increase the risk of detection.’

He got out the words with difficulty under the fire of her eyes.

‘ Your best plan is to stop here and act precisely as though I were dead and buried. I am dead—so far as the old life is concerned.’

Gordon did not look at Sandy, or he would have seen a glittering denial of that statement in the little beady eyes.

‘Then who—?’ Sybil began, hoarsely.

‘Who will take care of you? Surely, Sybil, you know that better than I do?’

‘I meant,’ Sybil said, gulping down her emotion, ‘who will take care of *you*?’

‘Oh, for the present—Elspeth,’ he said, airily.

‘Elspeth!’ Sybil wailed. ‘You too?—are you going to leave me?’

The old woman’s face was tremulous; she twisted her apron into knots, unable to speak: and then the pent-up passion forced its way in a shrill cry:

‘Oh, my lammie! my lammie! You’ll

sune hae a mon o' your ain, and winna be wantin' Elspeth. But my heart's i' twain 'twixt yoursel' an' Robert Gordon. You're my ain bairn; but no' like what he is. I took him a day-babe fra his deid mither's breist, an' I suckled him at my ain. My life's i' his bluid. I hae gotten him back fra the deid, an' I canna want him again. Oh, my lammie! my lammie! It braks my heart to pairt wi' you, but I canna leave the mannie whose wee lippies hangit at my bosom!

She sank into a chair and threw her apron over her head, rocking to and fro and moaning; and Sybil turned her white face to Sandy and tried to smile still.

'You'll have to take care of me, Sandy.'

But Sandy shuffled his splay feet across

the room, and kissed her hand, while tears poured down his rugged face.

‘ Missie, missie ! gin I could but dae it ! When I min’ o’ you tendin’ my little lass, an’ shieldin’ her an’ a’, I canna but bide wi’ you. But when I min’ o’ my little lass dyin’ wi’ his name on her tongue, I canna leave him. For, oh, missie, I promist I wad ne’er leave Robert Gordon till his soul were savit. He’s back fra the deid, a bran’ fra the burnin’ ; an’ I’ll no leave him again till he lies i’ the grave he’s boun’ for.’

Sybil pressed her hands together, and the smile, strange and sad and awful, broke at last over her face.

‘ When are you going ? ’ she asked, turning to her father.

Her terrible eyes made him uncom-

fortable. With a great effort he answered, lightly,

‘To-night. As soon as it is dark. Sandy is to drive me, and bring the carriage back.’

‘I’m no to dae that last,’ said Sandy, under breath.

‘You will stay here, Sybil, and make what arrangements you please. My old friend Ladislaw has left you a fortune, so you are quite independent of your old dad, eh?’

He smiled playfully into her eyes, but her dumb anguish shocked through the smile and made it bitterest cynicism.

‘Come, come, lassie,’ he said, ‘don’t make it harder for your old dad. I didn’t want you to know that it is you driving your father from the home of his youth ;

but you don't see it in the right light, and you force me to tell you. Sybil, I am doing this for your sake !'

His breast expanded, and he made a theatrical gesture that was very effective.

'Do you think it costs me nothing, Sybil, to leave this beautiful spot,—to go away from my native town, the place where I have loved—and lost?—to say good-bye to childhood's memories?—to bid farewell to all I hold dear?—to my child? Sybil, do you think it costs me nothing? Oh, my child! your silence wrongs me. You cannot know what I suffer;—and my only joy is in knowing that I suffer for your sake, in order that you may be happy . . . How I have hesitated before sacrificing myself! But I said, "It is for Sybil's sake, it is for love

of Sybil;" and so, my child, I am going I am going, Sybil, that you may be happy with the man you love. If I remained, you would sacrifice your beautiful youth to an old man,—weak, sinful, but still an old man that loves you . . . I cannot allow it! I will go and in my lonely exile I will tell myself that the sacrifice was worth the making—for Sybil's sake!

‘Is Bessie Haldane going to America, too?’ Sybil asked, with a hard disregard of this pathetic sacrifice.

For an instant his eyes faltered before her steady gaze.

‘I must refer you to herself,’ he said, smiling brilliantly, ‘now I can only think that we are about to part . . . And now, there are so many things to arrange . . . Shall we say good-bye?’

She came forward, still and silent, and bent her cold cheek to his kiss; while Elspeth sobbed aloud, and Sandy turned away a twitching face.

‘Good-bye,’ Gordon said. ‘Don’t upbraid yourself for being the cause of my exile, Sybil. You couldn’t help it; circumstances——’

He paused dramatically, giving Sybil an opportunity for reply; but she was dumb under the weight of her tearless anguish. She drew herself from him, and in silence went to her room to wrestle with this thing that had come upon her.

There she remained till, two hours later, a sound of wheels on the drive roused her from her dazed apathy. Then, wild with despair, she sprang down the staircase and threw herself on the muffled figure in the hall.

‘Oh, daddy! daddy! Take me with you. I am your little girl, Sybil. Your little girl! You *can’t* leave me like this!’

For a moment Gordon swerved in his purpose. His better self, atrophied by long years of crime, stirred to a pulse of remorse, and bade him renounce his plan of desertion. He remembered the years when Sybil’s presence alone had saved him from madness, when her love had been the one thing that had compensated for the living death to which his crime had doomed him.

Ah! if he had only known it, those remorseful years had been worthier than the past twelve months, with their mocking smiles and reckless gaiety.

Sybil’s love might yet lead him to some-

thing nobler. Her name might still be the keyword to a golden hoard—the open sesame to a life of atonement. She held the bonds that would save him from uttermost ruin and degradation. He had not hesitated to use her name criminally a year ago;—would he take it now and use it for the nobler purpose of regeneration?

The finer impulse was short-lived.

A vision of Bessie rose before his eyes, and he saw that he must choose between her and Sybil.

He rapidly weighed the alternatives;—with Bessie, love, forgetfulness; a dead past, a smiling future. With Sybil, struggle, bitter memory, self-loathing.

In her presence, he would never get away from the shadow of the past; never

away from the eyes of his murdered wife ; never away from the voice of his transgressions ! How little he guessed that, though Sybil were left behind, the shadow of the past would dog his steps in the form of the old man from whom he would never escape ; who would cling to him till death dissolved their reluctant companionship.

He made his choice ; but he would not betray himself—he would not tear away the disguise now at the last. He would bear himself bravely, and depart in all the glamour of sacrifice and a noble resignation.

‘Sybil,’ he cried, entreatingly, ‘don’t tempt me ! Don’t try to shake my determination. For *your* sake—for your sake, my child—I must go ! The old father must give way to the young lover.

I die in order that you may live’

He disengaged her arms and stepped steadily into the carriage, where Elspeth was already seated. Sandy was on the box alone, the reins in his hand.

Gordon leaned from the window, and airily blew a kiss towards the figure standing statue-like in the doorway.

The wheels crunched the gravel, and Don, a bounding shadow out of the darkness, sprang into the house and licked Sybil’s hand. She threw her arms round his neck, crying,

‘Oh, Don, you are all that is left to me now!’

He licked her face, then he wriggled from her arms and dashed away after the carriage. With a heart-broken moan, Sybil turned back to the desolate house.

The candles were low in their sockets,

the plants were withering, the room was dusty and untended. In the drawing-room the lamp had gone out, and a smouldering wick polluted the air. The place was full of ghosts : memories glad, and sad, and bad ; and hopes evanescent, and dead loves.

And in the silence Gordon's laugh mocked the shuddering night.

He was gone. She had lost everything ; father, lover, friend. She was alone in her misery. Alone in the deserted house with the sound of mocking laughter all about her, and the howl of eager winds rushing along the empty corridors and through the empty rooms. The silence was broken at last ! Alone in the greater desolation of her soul, full too of mocking laughter and changed voices that derided her anguish with scoffing echoes :

‘ For your sake, Sybil, I do it for your sake.’

Ah, she knew him now for what he was, —the father whom she had idolised, the flower and crown of manhood, the high priest of purity, the king of men.

Satire laughed in the very terms, and stung her to her own self-abasement.

She reviewed the past, and saw the fatal blindness that had held her eyes so long ; and she lived over again the years she had wasted on this man.

Yet even now she could not believe him utterly worthless. She recollected the days of depression when a dark grief had shadowed him. He had been strong then to struggle with his fate, and to conquer. She had seen him writhing under the lash of memory, stung to a maddened remorse by some haunting and mysterious sorrow ;

and he had gone forth from such an hour with calm brow and smiling lips, and no trace upon him of the desperate conflict.

Could such a man be weak ?

And yet he had yielded to temptation, and the one crime had forced him step by step from his stronghold, till now he stood undefended, selfish, base, criminal. He stood naked before her, shameless in his shame, brazen in audacity, unredeemed by one throe of remorse.

Sybil staggered at the horrid spectacle ; and yet she had not measured the height of his infamy, nor sounded the depth of his degradation.

And still he was her father, and she loved him still !

Outside in the hollow silence the lonely waves sobbed on the wind-swept shingle.

She threw up her arms despairingly,

then dashed herself to the ground with a passionate wail :

‘ O God ! let me die ! let me die ! ’

And there was silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

SALVE.

‘To have loved and been beloved again,
Is loftiest reach of Hope’s bright wings.’

THE sunlight flooded the silence, glowing, and dancing, and lighting up the deserted rooms. It flashed in through the windows and lay in patches of gold on the carpets. It played on the ceilings, and lingered about the white face of Sybil lying on the floor where she had fallen the previous night.

Alec, standing in the doorway, was bathed in a flood of radiance that dazzled him and made him for the moment unable to see her.

A rumour that Sandy and Elspeth had eloped the night before had reached him, and, knowing that this pointed to Gordon's flight, he had hurried away to Belhaven in search of Sybil.

The empty hall greeted him churlishly, and he found his way up to the drawing-room, without encountering any living thing more communicative than a snail whose silver path betrayed its ambitious progress. He stood hesitating in the doorway till a sound, half-sob, half-moan, startled him, and he sprang forward and saw the girl lying crushed and dishevelled on the floor.

In a moment he was beside her, fury

against Gordon struggling with his love for Sybil.

He could almost have left her there to pursue after the callous ruffian and drag him to justice, but love mastered indignation.

‘Sybil, my own darling,’ he called, softly, ‘I have come to take you away.’

She turned her heavy eyes towards him, but the sun was on his face dazzlingly bright, and there was no recognition in her glance.

‘Sybil, Sybil, don’t look so! It is I—Alec. I have been thinking of what you said last night, and I can’t let you go, only in order to satisfy my father and mother. Dear—“for this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife.” My duty to you outweighs my duty to them : and they shall not come

between us any longer, whatever you may say.'

His quiet decision was impressive, and allowed of no appeal, but Sybil made him no answer.

'Sybil,' he continued, 'you are responsible to God and me and yourself—not to them at all. You shall not wreck our lives. I want my wife. I want to love and protect her as long as we both live. Do you hear, Sybil?—you have no choice in the matter.'

He gazed yearningly at her, but the heavy lids had fallen once more over her eyes, and she remained silent.

'I telegraphed last night for my mother. She will be here immediately to take you to the manse—and then, my own darling——'

A shuddering sigh filled the pause, and

he took her face in his hand and pressed passionate kisses on it. At his touch a great trembling seized her. She raised herself from the floor and gazed wonderingly at him, and he saw she had not been conscious of his presence till now.

‘Is it morning?’ she asked, pressing her hand over her eyes.

‘Yes, darling. The night is over. I have come——’

He stopped in his sentence, for she was violently trembling. Memory had returned, flooding her face with a passionate misery.

‘I remember now,’ she cried, hoarsely, shrinking from him. ‘Alec—you must go. You can’t love me now.’

‘I never loved you till now,’ he cried. ‘Whatever happens, you are mine. I shall never leave you again.’

He drew her within his arms, and she gazed at him with yearning, questioning eyes.

A long, long time she was silent ; and then she laid her head on his bosom, compelled by the love in his eyes and the light on his face, that made him beautiful as a young god.

And the sunlight flooded the silence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEMESIS.

‘Then comes the curtain’s cue to fall.’

‘YOUR English lord didn’t take kindly to a United States shave, did he, Uncle Sam?’ asked a smart young clerk of the coloured barber, who was resting after his æsthetic labours.

‘Well, he kinder jumped off the chair in a hurry, so he did, Mr. Frank. But I think he has got something on his mind,

that English lord. He gave me a new quarter for cutting his hair too.'

Meanwhile, Gordon was reading again the advertisement in the *Kansas City Herald* that had so agitated him in the barber's shop.

'G.—I am here. Say where I can see you.—Bessie.'

For a fortnight he had been expecting Bessie to meet him; but the days had dragged by bringing no news of her.

He had thought of Bessie every moment since landing in America. The strange sights he came across, the new surroundings and faces, were only so much padding between memories, and dreams, and longings, of which Bessie was the object.

At the newspaper office he tried to find out who 'Bessie' was; and the intelligent clerk, who knew the girl and the man for whom the advertisement was intended, gravely informed him that in such cases it was the custom to put another advertisement in the paper appointing a rendezvous.

This Gordon did, paying three hundred per cent. above the usual rates for an advertisement, to appear next day, asking 'Bessie' to meet 'G.' on the arrival platform of the Missouri Pacific Railway, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

It did not strike him as peculiar that there were two advertisements to this effect in the next day's paper; and he anxiously awaited the time of the appointment.

On the same platform, just before three o'clock, two young people were having a lover's quarrel.

Clinton Garrett, a professional gambler, with a 'hard' reputation—having shot a man dead in a saloon row three months before—was now bent on marrying a rich wife, and reforming.

He had progressed in his suit until to-day, when he found the girl furious with jealousy.

'When a man goes back on me, and runs round with a new girl every week, he shan't have anything to do with me,' she said. 'I do believe I have been keeping company with the meanest scoundrel west of Sandy Hook.'

Professional gamblers are silent men. Garrett neither spoke nor changed coun-

tenance as the girl turned her back on him and walked away.

It was then that Gordon stepped on the platform, looking at his watch.

A couple of brakesmen stared curiously at the English stranger, calculating to themselves how much his clothing had cost in Europe.

The slowly retreating figure of the angry girl caught Gordon's eye. She was strangely like Bessie, and he walked rapidly after her.

‘Bessie, Bessie, I have found you at last!’

But the girl, absorbed in her thoughts, did not hear him.

He touched her lightly upon the shoulder.

‘Won't you speak to me?’ he said.

She turned a flushed and angry face,

and black eyes dimmed with tears, upon him.

This fury his Bessie !

‘I beg your pardon, madam,’ Gordon stammered. ‘I’m afraid I have made a mistake, I——’

‘Garrett, will you stand there and let this low-down man insult me?’ the girl called out deliberately, and in a hard, rasping voice.

Gordon turned and found a short, pale-faced, handsome man, with a deep scar on his cheek, menacing him; and he caught these final words in answer to his attempted apology.

‘Well, see here, out you go from this place right away.’

He forced Gordon roughly almost to the edge of the platform. A shunting engine whistled close at hand. Gordon, to save himself from falling, half-clutched

at, half-struck the man who was threatening him.

The girl's scream and the semblance of a blow was excuse enough.

Garrett whipped his right hand like lightning to his pocket, drew out a Derringer pistol, and fired. The bullet struck Gordon high in the centre of the chest, severing the pulmonary artery.

He threw out his arms, spun blindly round, striking the woman in the face as he did so; then fell forward on his face, the death-rattle in his throat.

‘ You had better put out that man's coat. I guess it's on fire,’ said Garrett to the two railway brakesmen.

While these things were going on in Kansas, a pleasant bustle of excitement

had reigned all day in the distant manse at Auchinblae.

It was over now ; groom and guest had departed, and the white-haired minister and his wife were superintending the planting of a larch beside the Scotch fir that had so long held its solitary state in the garden.

The old people looked across the valley, bright in the slanting rays of the sunset to the hills folded in the fading purple of the heather.

Here and there a corn-field, newly reaped, lay like a golden shield on the mountain's breast ; and on the higher peaks a thin haze caught the light, and wove daffodil wreaths around the hoary summits. Long level lines of gold showed where the yellow sun had dipped.

The wind had fallen, but the air was spicy with perfume of pine-woods and moor ; with smell of mint from the moist bog-land, and the fresh breath of the mountain tarns.

In the distance fell the faint bleat of the flocks ; and up from the valley the voices of the villagers rose singing. The sound of bells tinkled overhead, and a thrush in the Scotch fir made the air swoon with gladness.

Over the hills two people were walking eastward to meet the morning, while the minister and his wife stood in silence to watch the sunset.

They waited till the last sod had been replaced round the larch, and then the minister gave his arm to his wife.

‘ It will soon be chilly ; let us go in,’ he said.

‘What are you smiling at?’ she asked, a moment later.

‘I was thinking, my dear, that we may have a bairn’s avenue in the mause garden, after all.’

THE END.

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